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OH, PROFESSOR!

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WHAT THIS STORY IS ABOUT

Hilarious chance transforms overnight Professor Theodore Whinney of Grantley University from a nonentity into a celebrity of note. The change affects a number of lives, and indeed when the Professor gets into his stride as the Man Who Knows Everything, and becomes the adored idol of the public through his broadcasts and articles in the Press, the stage is set for bewildering events—which happen with startling rapidity.

This fast-moving story of fun and considerable frolic is calculated to keep the reader up till a late hour, for natural curiosity can scarcely refrain from desiring to know how the inexperienced Professor surmounts a tidal wave of romance that pitches him gaily from one contretemps to the next, until the Man Who Knows Everything finally learns something that is really worth while.

By the Same Author

MARRY THE GIRL
THE MAN WHO STAYED TO SUPPER
SPRINGTIME COMES TO WILLIAM

OH, PROFESSOR !

A COMEDY

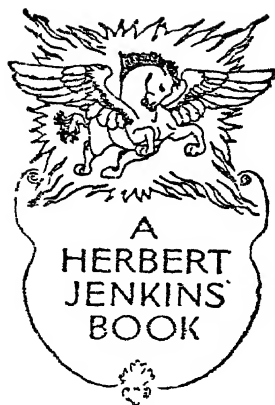
by

SYDNEY HORLER

LONDON

HERBERT JENKINS LIMITED

3 DUKE OF YORK STREET, ST. JAMES'S, S.W.1



First printing

TO SHEILA
WITH THE AUTHOR'S LOVE

*Printed in Great Britain by
Wyman & Sons, Ltd., London, Fakenham and Reading.*

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*All the characters in this book are imaginary
and have no relation whatsoever to any living persons.*

THIS BOOK IS PRODUCED IN
COMPLETE CONFORMITY WITH THE
AUTHORIZED ECONOMY STANDARDS

CHAPTER I

PORTRAIT OF A PROFESSOR

LET this be said at once: Theodore Whinney had the bulge on Byron; for whereas the poet (or so the story goes) became famous in a night, Whinney achieved what looked like immortality in precisely forty minutes.

Whereon hangs a strange, piquant, and, let us hope, highly moral story.

Theodore Whinney was scarcely the type whom the casual observer of mankind would have said was marked down by Fate for setting the world by the ears. Quite the reverse, in fact: at thirty-five, Theodore was merely one amongst London's many milling millions; he lived—or, rather, existed—and when one has said that, one has practically exhausted the subject.

Theodore was slight in stature, inclined to be round-shouldered, wore thick-lensed spectacles, and presented altogether such an appropriate picture of his calling—that he might have stood as a model for any competent portrait painter.

Theodore was a Professor—how clever of you to have guessed it! Yes, T. W. earned his living—which was anything but a luxurious one—by expounding the principles of several obscure subjects to the irreverent undergraduates at Grantley University, London. It was not a very comfortable occupation, seeing that he had scarcely any idea of infusing discipline into a roomful of students, or of compelling their regard; but he found compensation in the fact that he was doing the thing he liked doing, and the thing, moreover, at which he knew himself to be pretty good.

The explanation of this is that Theodore Whinney had always loved learning for its own sake; he absorbed information like a sponge. In his schooldays, whilst his contemporaries had gone off to the sports-fields or the swimming-bath, he—the loathed swot!—had shut himself up in the boot-room with a copy of a popular encyclopædia. By the time he was sixteen, he could have stumped many an authority on his own pet subject.

Theodore's way of life might have been different if he had ever had any masculine influence. But Theodore's father had died the day after he was born—the cynics said that he was overwhelmed at the thought that he had been responsible for bringing such an object into the world—and from then on Theodore was entirely woman-bound. Apart from his students (he had practically no friends at Grantley), his life was governed, ruled, influenced and, above all, circumscribed, by his mother and two sisters. When it is said that his mother had been a Miffkin, one of that notorious clan that rules Whitehall in the same way that a despotic Eastern potentate rules his ignorant and fearful subjects, one has said enough, perhaps, at this early stage, to throw a little light on the difficulties that beset Theodore's path.

Not that he seemed to mind being beset: directly he was free to do so, he would shake the dust of Grantley University from off his somewhat splayed feet, and speed him by 'bus or tube to the small flat in Parliament Hill Gardens, N.W.3, where he became caught up and entirely surrounded by his mother and two sisters once he stepped inside the front-door.

The normal man would have rebelled at this matriarchal tyranny, for tyranny it was, but the trouble with Theodore was, he was not normal; he had none of the attributes of the normal man—indeed, certain of his colleagues and near-intimates often speculated ribaldly if he could

reasonably be considered to belong to the masculine sex at all.

Be that as it may—and it is not our present province to probe into such a divergent subject—Theodore, strange to relate, was happy. Or, to put it in another way, he was as happy as any human being living his narrow, restricted and severely confined existence could be expected to be: he had his work, and he had his mother, and he had his sisters.

Agatha and Ida Whinney had never married; they had remained a pair of devastating virgins. Even the huge number of dependents on the Miffkin goodwill, who would have done anything in reason to secure promotion in one of the many Ministries to which they were attached like so many half-dead limpets, did not dare to take this particular risk: they came, they saw, but they were not conquered. Instead, with joy bubbling in their narrow breasts at the thought that they were still free, they went away, leaving Agatha and Ida exactly as they had found them. Agatha was now thirty-two and Ida thirty-seven. No living book-maker with any sense left in his head would have laid any odds against either going to her grave unmated.

Naturally, the state of the market being what it was, both Agatha and Ida scoffed long and loudly at the entire marriage-state; they professed to have an illimitable contempt for “being any man’s slave.” Their *pince-nez* (myopia ran in the Whinney family as gout or bow-legs run in others) shook on their thin, veinous noses as they proclaimed the fact. They were perfectly happy as they were, they told callers and friends. Yet, so odd is female nature that, in the privacy of their bedroom (owing to the restricted size of the flat, they were forced to share a room), they would, like the more famous Mercy and Charity Pecksniff, frequently indulge in verbal blood-lettings that for ferocity could only be compared to a pair of fiercely-spitting cats indulging in sporadic guerilla warfare on the roof-tops.

Not content with resolving never to become entangled in the net of matrimony themselves, Agatha and Ida were irrevocably determined that the sully hand of marriage should not be cast on Theodore. For their only brother was not only the declared apple of all their eyes (how these would glisten behind their *pince-nez* when they spoke of him to an outsider!), but he was their financial prop and stay. Small as Theodore's salary at Grantley University was, it was yet sufficient to give them meagre bed and board. True, Agatha earned a little now and again by translating something or other from a foreign language which nobody ever read because no publisher could be found to give the result to an expectant world; true, again, that Ida so far unbent on occasion as to give lessons in German, French and Spanish to the very varied assortment of humanity which considered it essential to their ease of soul that they should obtain at least a smattering of these alien tongues. But the principal financial pillar of the Whinney household remained the wage-packet which Theodore brought home on the first of every month and placed in the eagerly waiting hands of his mother.

As it happened, the day on which this chronicle opened was the first of the month—the first of May, to be exact. Now, May, according to tradition, has for time immemorial been a happy month: Spring is in the air, the flowers are in bloom, the human heart turns lightly to Love and what-not, and everything in the garden is lovely.

But it was clearly evident to Theodore, once he walked into the small sitting-room of the flat, that the zephyrs usually associated with May had given place to what approximated to a near relation of an Arctic gale. The atmosphere bore a close resemblance to the scene subsequent to the reading of a will by the family solicitor who has disclosed the fact that all the money of the wealthy deceased

has been left to a particularly useless branch of Foreign Missions.

Naturally, this was perturbing to Theodore who, incidentally, had had a more than usually trying day himself.

"What's the matter?" he enquired. "Boomed" would perhaps be the better word, for, in striking contrast to his insignificant frame, the Grantley University professor possessed a voice of astonishing volume, the effect of which was very much like a piccolo-player producing double-bass noises.

Mrs. Whinney whinnied. Looking like a disgruntled horse—the usual impression she presented to the world—she replied: "Agatha wants a new dress, Ida wants new shoes, and I am desperately in need of a new hat."

Theodore rubbed his apology of a chin with his right hand. Although his own mundane needs were so few—a handful of dates with an occasional drink of cold water would have suited him nicely—he yet knew that money, whilst being a curse, was also a necessity. Very much of a necessity, it would seem, when the clothing of the female body was concerned. He did not stop to speculate on the causes of this febrile craving after adornments on the part of his encumbrances; sufficient for him was the fact that the three nearest and dearest to him were discontented.

"I'm sorry my salary isn't larger, mother," he retorted.

On the ordinary occasion, this would have been enough; all three would instantly have gathered round him and united in declaring that it was shameful that a man of his outstanding attainments should be forced to work for such a miserable emolument. But now, urged on by the unrest which the approach of Spring causes to surge in the female breast, all three sang a very different tune.

They reproached him!

"Really, Theo," said Agatha, whose activities in the

translation line seemed to have come temporarily to a dead end, "I do think you might try to better yourself."

"Yes," supported Ida, who had had a particularly angry session with a lout whose grasp of the Spanish language promised to be always even less than elementary, "when I look round this flat, and see how miserably small it is, I feel ashamed—*really* ashamed."

"It is not as though I had ever ceased to try to do my duty," chimed in Mrs. Whinney; "when your father was so selfish as to die almost immediately after you were born, Theodore, everything was left to me to do. It is not my fault that we are so poor."

Although a professor of obscure and entirely useless subjects, Theodore had his feelings. His heart was touched, his better nature wounded. He could have retorted that it was not his fault, either; that he did his duty in that state of life—peculiar though it might be—to which Destiny had called him, and that was that.

But, being Theodore Whinney, he did not reply in kind. Instead, his voice, although still producing double-bass effects, was dulcet and soothing.

"If you can suggest any means by which I can augment my present salary—which, I am willing to admit, *is* rather small to meet the needs of a family of four—I should be only too glad to consider it."

Those were his words, and it would be a harsh critic indeed who could call them unreasonable or uncompromising.

It was Ida, her highly-charged, virginous thirty-seven years weighing heavily upon her, who replied. She spurned the *beau geste*.

"Bestir yourself, Theodore," she trumpeted; "you are in a rut; get out of it! How you can remain content with your present conditions I fail to imagine. You should have more ambition—bestir yourself!"

Theodore blinked at his eldest sister through his thick-lensed spectacles.

"Bestir myself?" he repeated.

"Bestir yourself," she reiterated; "surely you are not going on like this all your life?"

He felt the threadbare carpet rocking beneath his feet. Existence, which had seemed so secure (if somewhat hum-drum) a bare ten minutes before, now took on the aspect of a surrealistic dream.

"I am afraid——" he started, severely.

Agatha brought up the tanks.

"That's just it, Theodore," she declared; "you're afraid—afraid to risk, afraid to venture. Ida is right: you've got yourself into a rut, and you're too fearful to get out of it. If I were a man——"

Theodore flung back his head. He might have been replying to a world-wide challenge. Fixing his mother with his eye—the right one—he said firmly: "I am hungry; I want my dinner."

After all, there is a limit to what even a Professor of obscure and perfectly useless subjects can endure.

CHAPTER II

BUBBLE AND TROUBLE IN NORTHERN HOUSE

INSIDE that massive and curiously-shaped building designed by Sir Peter Peter, the famous (some said infamous) architect, known as Northern House, there was so much bubble and trouble that the three witches in *Macbeth* might have been using it for a blasted heath.

Not that bubble and trouble were alien qualities inside Northern House; the staff, whose legions by now numbered several thousand strong, were so used to turmoil and trouble

of one kind or another that they would have felt it both strange and sinister if their days and nights had suddenly become peaceful and well-ordered.

But perhaps before we go any further, it had better be explained what Northern House stood for, and what precisely went on inside its monstrously sprawling shape.

Northern House was the G.H.Q. of the Northern Radio Company, the means by which the millions of wireless addicts both in Great Britain itself and in all those dependencies, colonies and what have you, representing the far-flung British Empire, were enabled to keep abreast of current affairs.

The Northern Radio Company had no rivals; it controlled the home ether completely: if you wanted to listen-in, you had to accept what the Northern Radio Company offered you or go without. Many went without.

Monopoly is generally an evil thing, and whilst the word "evil" was incompatible with the excessively pure tone of the N.R.C., yet it cannot be denied that the lack of competition in this vital part of national publicity led to some very distressing results. It led, amongst other things, to poor payment for artistes, poor salaries for the majority of the multitudinous staff, poor *morale* and poor results generally: a writer, for instance, who could command any sort of an audience by other means—journalism, fiction or any such media—turned down with a gesture of contempt any offers made to him by the Heads of the various Departments at Northern House; actors looked upon employment in any capacity at N.H., as something vaguely degrading, and there was discontent in every direction.

The trouble was that the Northern Radio Company had a very flat-footed conception of its true functions. Its true functions were (1) to supply the listening public with the best News Service that Money, Intelligence and Ingenuity could devise; (2) to provide light entertainment

that was really worth listening to; and (3) to cater for the more serious-minded, broadcasting interesting talks and debates on burning questions of the hour. The Northern Radio Company claimed in and out of season that it did all these things; on the other hand, many millions of listeners, giving a very praiseworthy impression of an angry horde who would only be satisfied by the spilling of buckets of blood, vehemently declared that the whole show ought to be written off as a dead loss, Northern House itself razed to the ground, and a fresh start made. Whilst it was true that it is notoriously difficult to please everybody, the Northern Radio Company enjoyed the singular infelicity of (apparently) pleasing no one.

It was all very sad, of course, but when a great business like the Northern Radio Company is organized and run along the lines similar to those of a Government Civil Service Department; when, owing to the entire lack of competition, the spirit of enterprise was stifled before it was even born; when a play-safe policy was always adopted; when Compromise was the ruling passion (if anything so entirely bloodless as the N.R.C. could be said even to know the meaning of the word); when all question of healthy controversy was regarded as the Seven Deadly Sins rolled into one—when, in short, a dull and deadening pallor lay over everything, what else could be expected? Due to the Mandarin atmosphere in which it had been conceived, and in which it had been more and more enveloped until now it was positively stifled by it, the Northern Radio Company was slowly dying of sheer inertia, but hated to admit the fact.

Not in public that was; in private the Heads were plainly worried. They, following the example of some Government Departments, didn't care twopence for the opinion of the masses, as such, but when, owing to repeated questions being asked in the House of Commons about the "amazing inefficiency and complete disregard of the public taste,"

as one small, pimply member had recently put it, they felt their jobs were imperilled, they called themselves to a Conference and began to consider ways and means.

Sitting in at that Conference was Horace Wimbush. Horace was a tall, spare, scanty-haired man of thirty-seven. He had spent the last fifteen years of his life in the service of the Northern Radio Company, and had bitterly regretted every one of them. Now he was next-door to being a broken man. Joining the Company straight from a City office, where he had felt cramped, he had conceived himself a born organizer of radio. Always an amateur wireless enthusiast, he had thought he had arrived at his heart's desire when he was appointed to a minor post at the mausoleum in Pifford Street, W.1. Nothing should stand in the way of his new career; he would forswear all carnal longings including Wine, Women and Song; he would remain unmarried; he would work hard and late; in fact, he would do more than earn success: he would command it.

Alas! poor Horace! It didn't work out a bit like that. Absorbed in his dream, he forgot one essential truth—namely, that human nature remains human nature whether it is encountered in Witt Street, E.C.2, or in Pifford Street, W.1. The only difference, he soon discovered, was that human nature in Pifford Street, W.1, was of the accelerated, concentrated and intensified variety. Northern House proved to be the world in miniature—only more so. Being forced to work under conditions against which any healthy-minded person would have rebelled, both men and women were forced to become (unless they had the courage to break away) frustrated animals who resorted to spying on each other, back-biting, and displaying all those other traits which caused the poet on a certain memorable occasion to declare, as he looked out of his study window towards the

distant hill-top, that every prospect pleased him except Man—and Man was vile. Horace Wimbush, as he sat in his small room, entirely surrounded by piles of letters from indignant listeners-in, walked the corridors (there were many miles of them) of Northern House, and caught the back-wash of conflicting temperaments, often recalled the poet's words and marvelled at their realism. He evolved a philosophy of his own on the same subject. This was that the world would be a mighty pleasant place if only Mankind died off *en masse*. Particularly, of course, that section which functioned at Northern House . . .

As time passed—it could not be said to fly in his case—Horace became soured, disgruntled and prematurely grey. He was embittered. He felt a searing contempt for himself: he hated his prison, but he had not the courage to break the bars. “Who would be fool enough to give employment to an ex-employee of Northern House?” he often asked himself, and never received a satisfactory answer. All his bright dreams had turned, during the passage of the years, into nightmares; he had seen his best ideas trampled on, treated with scorn, generally derided; he had watched pussy-footed yes-men promoted above his head; he had fallen in love and been turned down. “You work at Northern House?” the girl of his choice had said scornfully; “oh, I couldn’t possibly marry anybody at Northern House; all my friends would laugh at me; they’d say I’d married a cissy . . .”

In the end he had accepted defeat. Only now and again did the old enthusiastic, campaigning spirit surge in his breast—but, and here is the important point, it was surging whilst he listened to the High-ups giving their pontifical consideration to the various suggestions put forward by their underlings as to how the present lamentable position could be salvaged. At the moment the Company appeared

to have struck a new "low" in public appeal; its name was Mud, and there were none so lowly that they did not feel compelled to complain.

The Chairman of this Conference was Sir Harry Titmarsh, C.B.E. No living soul was quite sure why Titmarsh had been appointed to his present position, which was the very important one of Joint Controller of the Northern Radio Company; but with typical British genius for putting the square peg in the round hole, Sir Harry (who had made his fortune as the principal of a big chain of grocery-stores) was now principally responsible for providing the millions of the British radio audience with the pabulum he rashly decided they ought to have for the good of their souls. It puzzled Titmarsh to learn that groceries and popular entertainment did not necessarily go hand in hand; but, although puzzled, he was not perturbed. Men of his type are difficult to perturb; their self-confidence is too deeply implanted for that.

Titmarsh was a large, bluff-mannered man, who looked like a Wart-hog, and did little, if anything, to remove this initial impression. He was the most cordially-disliked person in the whole of Northern House, which was saying something.

Having dismissed all the suggestions for improving the present execrable programmes of the Northern Radio Company which had been put forward by his underlings, with various snorts of contempt, accompanied by sweeping gestures of his hands, Titmarsh now turned to Horace Wimbush.

"And you—I don't know your name," he started with characteristic rudeness, "what have you to suggest? You haven't said anything yet, I've noticed."

This was the moment for which Horace had been waiting: having been warned of the Conference beforehand, he had spent the greater part of the previous night in racking what

residue of brains his many years' service in the Company had left him.

Oh, for an IDEA! An IDEA which would prove to his superiors, those pie-faced and hen-headed stuffed shirts, that he was worthy of consideration and a much bigger pay-envelope!

Now, it is a well-recognized fact amongst brain-workers that the harder one tries to induce a worth-while idea to spring to the surface, the more arid is the result: the really brilliant notion only comes of its own free-will; it will not be forced. A delicate plant, it requires persuasion rather than coercion. Yet, if only to prove that every rule can be broken, round about four o'clock in the morning, something really stupendous—a positive brain-wave, as a matter of fact—leapt into Wimbush's mind. So staggering was it in its possibilities that the fortunate tenant jumped forth-with out of bed and commenced an impromptu dance of triumph on the worn linoleum.

Now, in what he confidently felt was his greatest hour, he faced Wart-hog with an equanimity he had never previously known. He looked him straight in the eye.

"The reason I have not spoken before, sir," he remarked, "has been due to two facts, both of them I think important."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Wart-hog, who felt that this non-entity badly required putting in his place; "and may I be bold enough to ask what in your opinion, Mr.——"

"Wimbush is the name; Horace Wimbush."

"May I be bold enough to ask what, in your opinion, Mr. Wambut——"

"Wimbush," came the correction; "it is spelt W I M - B U S H."

"I apologize," replied the Chairman, with elaborate insolence; "I should have called you 'Wimbush.' And now for the two reasons why you haven't favoured us so far with any ideas."

Horace hitched his chair a little forward; for the second time he fixed Wart-hog with his eye.

"My first reason," he then replied, "was because I was not asked, and the second was that I wanted your full attention. For I thought of an IDEA last night which, if it is not trampled on elephant-fashion—as I may say so many of the suggestions I have put forward from time to time have been trampled on—will revolutionize our broadcasting."

Wart-hog stared. Also his nose twitched, a sure sign that he was ruffled. A die-hard Tory (like most wealthy men who have risen from nothing, and made their money out of the efforts of those they have left behind in the race), the word "revolutionize" caused every nerve in his squat, thick body to vibrate; it was as though he had a bell inside his solar plexus, and that somebody had rung it, using a fair-ground hammer.

He became very stiff.

"I think your language is exaggerated, Mr. Wimbush, but all the same, my colleagues and I will be pleased to hear what else you have to say."

Horace braced himself to the task. He realized that the odds were against him; he knew that the chances were at least 50-1 that his proposal would be turned down—flat; he knew, moreover, that he had made a bad error in using the word which had caused Sir Harry Titmarsh to go such a rich puce colour.

But, filled and animated by a new spirit of confidence, he launched into his story.

"According to ninety-five per cent of the letters I have read—and I would remind you, sir, that it is my present job to peruse all the letters from listeners which arrive at Northern House—there is very grave dissatisfaction with our present programmes. Ignoring the more frivolous and abusive, the causes of complaint on the part of the

better-informed of the writers would appear to be (a) that the programmes are too frivolous, and (b) that they are too ponderous."

"Ponderous?" interjected the Vice-Chairman of the Conference, a notorious player-up to the Wart-hog.

Horace rose to unexpected and unsuspected heights of independence.

"'Ponderous' was the term I used, and 'ponderous' is I am convinced, the right word in the circumstances. I might have substituted many other words—'heavy,' 'stodgy' and 'dull' amongst them—but 'ponderous,' I repeat, is the best description—a description with which I must say I myself agree."

"Keep to the point, please!" ejaculated the Chairman; "enough time has already been wasted; I have a Board Meeting in half-an-hour," consulting the 100-guinea wrist-watch, the result of a specially profitable deal in sultanas; "confine yourself to the essentials, Mr. Lambish."

"*Wimbush*, if you don't mind," shot back the now thoroughly intrepid Horace. "Well, as I was about to say," giving Wart-hog a reproachful glance, "my idea is to try to please both sections of the present extremely critical public; I propose in this new feature—of which I must insist on being placed in sole charge—to present serious information in the guise of popular entertainment. The result, I am confident, would be an instant success."

"Explain!" snapped the Chairman.

Wimbush placed his elbows on the table and fixed his gaze yet more implacably upon the man whom he felt hated his guts.

"My proposal is this," he said: "we invite the public to send in questions embracing every subject under the sun—every subject which lends itself to discussion on the air, that is, of course—and these questions will be answered by a panel of experts—biologists, scientists, economists, etc., etc."

"That's good!" exclaimed a voice from the other end of the table; "popular education is all the rage now, thanks to the recent debates in Parliament. Really, Mr. Chairman, I think it an excellent idea of Mr. Timbush's."

"WIMBUSH, you fool!" roared the originator of the idea; "how many more times have I to say it?"

"Control yourself, young man," reproved Wart-hog; "do you realize where you are—and what you are saying?"

It was enough; in fact, it was more than enough.

Horace Wimbush, feeling that a man like himself could not be expected to suffer such fools gladly, got to his feet.

"That is my suggestion, gentlemen," he said, firmly; "and if you don't see fit to adopt it and place me in charge, I shall have very great pleasure in handing you my resignation. I may add that, in the latter event, I shall accept an offer which has recently been made to me by a certain publisher to write an account of my personal experiences in Northern House. I propose to call the volume—if I write it—*Fifteen Years in Bedlam*." With that he walked quickly to the door, followed by every eye in the room.

It proved a master-stroke in tactics. If there was one thing which Sir Harry Titmarsh loathed; if there was one thing which caused him to shake in every ounce of his sixteen-stone-four-and-a-half-pounds body, it was publicity—unfavourable publicity. Quickly his horrified mind reacted to the threat: unless this whippersnapper's idea was adopted, the said whippersnapper would publish a book containing many statements which the Press, already jealous of the powers conferred on the Northern Radio Company, would seize upon with loud whoops of joy and present to the world in huge and ribald headlines. *Fifteen Years in Bedlam*! No! A thousand times NO!! Wasn't he one of the Joint-Principals of the Company? Could he afford to be lampooned? Already the Left-Wing papers were printing acid enquiries as to the suitability of a grocer—a grocer,

indeed!—being the responsible Head of a Broadcasting System. He had borne enough; he refused to bear any more. A master of expediency (he had learned the art during the few years he had sat in the House of Commons as member for South-west Slopperton), he now smiled instead of frowned.

“A very remarkable young man that,” he told the astonished company; “a genius if I ever saw one. Why has he been hiding his light for so long? To think that Northern House has harboured a man of such exceptional gifts for fifteen years without properly appreciating the fact! Well, I myself have always believed in giving Talent its chance: gentlemen, I propose forthwith that the suggestion of Mr.—I forget his name—should be adopted. Any to the contrary?”

Wart-hog, being who and what he was, did not anticipate any opposition—and, of course, he did not get it.

Horace Wimbush, lurking in his small room, feeling—now that the wave of excitement had passed—like a condemned prisoner awaiting the executioner, was informed, half-an-hour later, that the bluff had worked.

Fate had moved in a mysterious way its wonders to perform.

CHAPTER III

THE MAN WHO KNEW EVERYTHING

ONCE the die had been cast, things began to happen at Northern House. Now that his luck had turned at long last, Horace Wimbush put his shoulder to the wheel: to abandon metaphor, and to get down to brass tacks, he got cracking.

Having been given a free hand to make his own arrangements, the first thing he did was to appoint a small staff—to his credit let it be said that there were no yes-men in the bunch—who were detailed to do the necessary research work. This consisted of consulting every available book of reference, special attention being paid to *Who's Who*, with a view to choosing a number of specialists in different subjects who might serve, if they were agreeable, on the panel of Answerers. It was a ticklish task, but eventually twelve names were approved.

But this was merely the first of many difficulties: Horace discovered that it was one thing to make a choice, but it was quite another to induce the selected person to serve. The scientists were particularly troublesome; they held the view (peculiar to their kind) that Science was a subject that should be kept unrevealed to the common herd, and discussed only amongst themselves. Over many luncheon-tables Wimbush argued, entreated and implored, and eventually—but not before he had reached the inner edge of Despair—two famous scientists, prompted more by kindness of heart than any other motive, put their prejudices on one side, and said they would co-operate at least once.

"But, mind you," added Professor Basil Longwith (whose special dream it was to fly to the moon in a rocket built under his direct personal supervision), "I think it a crazy idea, and I expect it will prove a damn-awful flop!"

"We shall see," replied Wimbush, biting his lip.

Word that Longwith—notoriously a difficult character—had given in soon got round, and, one by one, ten of the original selections agreed reluctantly to place their accumulated knowledge at the disposal of the Northern Radio Company and the millions to whom it catered.

Now arose another snag. All these men were specialists, and the information they possessed outside of their particular

subjects would not have done much credit to a backward child. What was wanted to complete the team and round it off was a man who knew a bit about everything under the sun—really knew it; a man who could stand up to any kind of bowling, fast, swerve, slow leg-break and googly, and score runs off it. Horace Wimbush, from his previous experience, knew enough about the British Public to be aware that, once the new Feature, his own special baby, was announced through the media of the Northern Radio Company's own organ, *Wireless Tidings*, and the Popular Press, many millions of self-appointed Smart Alecks would take a fiendish delight in sending in questions to "Here Are The Answers" Dept. which would have left Socrates, Plato and all the rest of the Ancients gasping for breath.

Happening to mention the matter to Gains Ogilvie, the world-famous biologist, whose sardonic sense of humour had been tickled by the prospect of acting as one of the panel of experts, he was surprised to see a gleam of response in Ogilvie's eyes. He was still more surprised when the biologist said: "There should be no difficulty about that."

"But," protested Wimbush, thinking, naturally enough, that the other was pulling his leg, "I want someone who is a human encyclopædia!"

"Well, I have the very man for you," retorted Ogilvie, delivering body-blow number two.

"Who is he?" asked the incredulous Wimbush.

"You have never heard of him, but his name is Whinney—Theodore Whinney. He's a Professor at Grantley University, and he's the man who knows everything. No," as Wimbush's left hand reached out instinctively for a near-by copy of *Who's Who*. "You won't find him included in any book of reference; for one thing, he's too shy, and for another, he's not important enough."

"'Not important enough'," echoed the other; "then how can he be of any use to us?"

"For the very reason you want him, my dear fellow; you tell me you want a human encyclopædia; well, this bloke Whinney is just that; he's a sponge that laps up information of all kinds and never lets it go. He's been doing it all his life—and is still doing it. He's the most amazing fellow I've ever met, or am ever likely to meet—and if you take my advice, you'll get on to him at once."

On what trivial threads do great events hang! But for the Spring fret which still laid waste the breasts of his mother and his two sisters, it can be stated with some certainty that Theodore Whinney would have tossed the letter signed "Horace Wimbush," and written on stiff white notepaper with the heading:

*Northern Radio Company,
Northern House, W.I.*

contemptuously into the waste-paper basket. As it was, he read the strange communication a second time.

It was certainly something to be read a second time by a hardworked but impecunious professor, whose nearest and dearest were lusting after sartorial gauds, for it ran:

DEAR SIR,

Your name has been favourably mentioned to us by Mr. Gains Ogilvie, the eminent biologist.

We are planning an entirely new feature in broadcasting, and we are very anxious to secure your help and co-operation.

As the matter is urgent, we should be greatly obliged if you could find it convenient to make an early appointment with the undersigned at Northern House. Meanwhile, please be good enough to treat this letter confidentially.

Yours very truly,
HORACE WIMBUSH.

Noticing the earnest concentration the provider of their separate and collective meal-tickets was giving the letter which had arrived by the last post, the three female Whinneys, naturally enough, demanded an explanation.

Theodore, smarting under the rebukes of the past three days, during which time he had been busier than any beaver in trying to discover by what means he could augment his despised income, and thus cause Peace to descend upon the old home again, rose to the occasion.

"The Northern Radio Company want me to do some work for them," he said, using the deepest notes in his vocal register.

"What kind of work?" enquired his mother.

"The writer doesn't say." Theodore's reply was short, and, in the circumstances, who could blame him?

"The Northern Radio Company," echoed Agatha, awe and jealousy mingling in her voice. There was an adequate reason for this combination: unknown to anybody, Agatha Whinney had tried (unsuccessfully) to sell some children's plays to the Northern Radio Company, and when these were returned with the deadly monotony of homing pigeons the iron had entered into her soul. The revelation that her brother—a person who, in her heart of hearts, she secretly pitied because of his general futility—should have received such a signal honour, shook her to her No. 8 size shoes. How unfair was Life! How monstrous its injustices! "What on earth do they want to see you about, Theo?" she asked.

Her brother pursed his lips. This moment of triumph was very sweet.

"I will read out the letter," he said; "but first I must have the promise of all of you to treat this matter confidentially; you must all pledge yourselves to discuss it with no one . . . well, I'm waiting," he added, peremptorily.

"You are getting a bit above yourself, aren't you, Theo?" commented Ida. As the eldest child, she was feeling aggrieved that all the honour of this unique occasion should have fallen upon her brother—a man whom hitherto she had regarded merely as the family bread-winner, a decidedly

prosaic hewer of wood and drawer of water. She was fond of Theodore in a sisterly fashion, of course, but her affection did not extend to allowing her brother to have all the limelight thrust upon him without a pang of envy.

Whilst the two girls still hesitated, Mrs. Whinney gave the necessary lead.

"For my part, I will promise not to discuss the matter with anyone," she said; "I do not forget that I am a Miffkin, and, incidentally, I have always considered listening to the wireless not only an unprofitable but a somewhat vulgar occupation."

Her son winced; he always winced whenever his mother reminded him that she had been born a Miffkin and not a Whinney. The other insult he decided to ignore.

Instead, he turned to his sisters.

"You, Agatha?"

"I promise," was the tight-lipped response.

"You, Ida?"

"I promise," snapped his eldest sister, "although what all the fuss is about I must say I fail to understand."

"I will read the letter," pronounced Theodore, and proceeded to do so.

When he had come to an end, there was a silence—a gluey, suffocating silence.

Then Mrs. Whinney sat upright.

"And what, may I ask, Theodore, do you intend to do?" she demanded belligerently.

"Do?" the bread-winner retorted. "I shall write immediately to say that I propose to call upon this Mr. Wimbush at any time that is convenient to him."

Waving her two female offspring aside, both of them obviously waiting to give tongue themselves, Mrs. Whinney looked at the speaker with a basilisk eye. "Is it possible that you intend to lend whatever talents you may possess to this vulgar business of broadcasting?" she enquired.

Theodore planted both his feet firmly on the ground.

"Certainly," he replied, and the word was uttered with organ-like volume.

"Have you stopped to realize what your uncle might have to say on the matter?" continued his mother.

As she referred to the supreme Head of the entire Whinney clan, the most hated, the most prolific, but the most powerful of all the Civil Service dynasties ruling in Whitehall, the very Lord High Mucky-Duck, Sir Obadiah Miffkin, C.B.E., himself, it might have been supposed that Theodore Whinney, who hitherto had regarded himself as just so much dust beneath the Obadiah Miffkin chariot-wheel, would have faltered.

But this was the moment when the world waited breathlessly for a Whinney to stand up to a Miffkin and defy the latter to do his worst. Too long had the Miffkins trodden down the Whinneys.

Theodore did not fail the Whinneys.

"It is a matter of complete indifference to me," he declared in the deepest notes any of his listeners had yet heard, "what my uncle may think."

"*Theodore!*" cried his mother, aghast.

He faced her resolutely, and if her eye continued to be basilisk, his own was Spartan.

"You have been reproaching me for the past three days about not earning sufficient money to enable you to buy all the dresses you require, well, now the opportunity has come—or, at least, appears to be in the offing. Yet still you grumble."

For a moment, the guns of his mother were silenced. Surprise and indignation gripped her vitals—but the dominant quality was surprise; never since he had been weaned had Theodore spoken to her in such a manner. If he had not been a life-long teetotaller, she could have put this astonishing rebellious mood of his down to the

ravages of strong drink; but even this consolation was denied her.

Flung back on her last line of defence, she exclaimed: "I shall communicate with your uncle at once!"

Theodore gave her a long, lingering smile. It was a sardonic smile, and it cut her to the quick.

Meanwhile, all was not plain sailing at Northern House. The news that a new idea—so far as could be ascertained, an entirely new idea—had got past the vigilant guard of the High-Ups, had created consternation amongst the myriads who earned their living inside the portals of that preposterous but sacrosanct building. Such a thing had not been known in the whole twenty-odd years that the Company had been in existence. And when sleuths from the various Departments—Lighter Entertainment, Talks, the Religious Bureau, and the other closely-confined Sections—brought back the still more startling news that the man placed in charge of that said idea was none other than Horace Wimbush, who for years past had been relegated to a small back room, there to brood over the mammoth correspondence that arrived by the sackful, the whole of Northern House literally stood on its ear.

Human nature being what it is—especially in Northern House—the life of Horace Wimbush quickly became a constant hazard. He was spied upon incessantly; his personal correspondence was opened in the hope that something could be discovered in his private life which might be used to smudge his copybook. When this failed—Horace knew his onions sufficiently well not to mix his drinks, either literally or metaphorically—other tactics were tried. A vast whispering campaign started to spread throughout the length and breadth of the home of the Northern Radio Company; it filled the multitudinous rooms and the yet more multitudinous corridors; it filtered

at length (as, of course, was intended) into the spacious and elaborately-furnished chambers of the Highest of All.

The main burden of these malicious innuendoes was that if an entirely new idea had been allowed, by some miracle, to slip by, then Horace Wimbush was the last—the very last—person on the Northern Radio pay-roll to have been put in charge of it. What had the fellow done to justify such confidence? For fifteen years he had been immured inside Northern House, and everybody was under the impression he was one of the assistant-cleaners. Preposterous! Why, even Tompkins, fool as he was, would have been better. And so on and so forth.

The promoters of this anti-Wimbush movement hoped, of course, that when he realized how strong was the opposition to Horace, Sir Harry Titmarsh, C.B.E., would relegate the lamentable choice he had made to the permanent seclusion of the back room again, but the plot misfired for the very simple but adequate reason that the schemers misunderstood the first elements of human psychology. Was a man with such wart-hogian characteristics to admit he had made a mistake? Certainly not; and so, instead of Wimbush being ousted from his new post, he was sent for.

"And how are you getting on with that new feature?" he was asked. "I want you to make a success of it, because I feel a personal interest in your idea. Good luck to you!"

Feeling that the world was rising up to strike him, Horace departed from the Presence, and started to think of himself as a real Napoleon.

It was in this spirit that he received Professor Theodore Whinney, the man, he had been assured by Gains Ogilvie, who knew everything.

He was not impressed when the visitor was shown into the room. He saw a slight, somewhat insignificant man wearing thick-lensed spectacles, who looked as though he had found

difficulty until now in justifying his existence on the earth.

Horace's heart sank. Was this earthworm the person to justify the encomium which had been passed on him by Gains Ogilvie? Had not a terrible mistake been made? It certainly looked like it.

He got the preliminaries over quickly, and then settled down to business.

"I have prepared a list of questions, Mr. Whinney," he stated; "and—I must be very frank—upon your ability to answer these questions will depend whether . . ."

"Whether I am engaged or not; is that what you wish to tell me?" broke in the caller.

Wimbush thought it best for both parties to deliver the *coup de grâce*.

"Exactly," he replied, bluntly.

The caller flung back his head.

"Ask me the questions," he said, challengingly.

Twenty minutes later, Professor Theodore Whinney left Northern House. He had a contract in his pocket. Although any minor novelist would have despised the remuneration set forth in Clause 7, it represented to Theodore unheard-of riches.

Whilst the originator of the "Here Are the Answers" prospective feature still sat in a state of stupor, his secretary announced another visitor.

"Well?" queried Gains Ogilvie.

"You were right," said Wimbush, "that fellow Whinney is a human encyclopædia; he *does* know everything. I asked him twelve of the most difficult questions, all on different subjects, which I was able to evolve after studying several authoritative books of reference, and he answered them all pat and without a moment's hesitation. The bloke's a perfect marvel."

The eminent biologist nodded, approvingly.

"And you've fixed him up?" he asked.

"Certainly. I had a contract drafted straightaway—and now he's mine for keeps."

"I wonder," mused Ogilvie; "the public have not heard of him yet, but when they do . . ."

They were to prove prophetic words.

CHAPTER IV

THE RUFFLING OF SIR OBADIAH

AS already stated, the Miffkins were the most important family in the whole of the Civil Service. They had always been the most important family in the whole of the Civil Service since the memory of man. They swarmed here; they swarmed there; they swarmed everywhere. As though determined that the dynasty should never die out, they multiplied to an extent which would have been alarming to the average family; it was as though they had resolved never to allow any rival to compete in their hold on public affairs. There had always been Miffkins in Whitehall; there were Miffkins now; there always would be Miffkins. That was their motto.

Apart from their difference in nomenclature and ages, it was very difficult to distinguish one Miffkin from another. They all looked alike—a sandy-haired, washed-out looking crew, with long, pointed noses, perpetually pursed lips, and a supercilious manner. It was a Miffkin (of course) who, receiving a famous British journalist reluctantly at the Foreign Office, listened yawningly to the state of turbulent crisis in Central Europe—with its imminent threat of disaster to Great Britain—and replied at the end of the passionate appeal: "My dear fellow, you really should

change your shoemaker." Then, giving his thin behind a final warm by the blazing fire, he walked out of the room, leaving the journalist gaping with amazement.

His trouble was, of course, that, although he had heard of the Miffkins—the hidden power behind every important Government Department—he had never previously met one of the brood.

The present head of the Clan was Sir Obadiah Miffkin, C.B.E. There were numerous senior members of the family, it is true, but these were all retired, living on handsome pensions in Cheltenham, Bath, Bournemouth, Paignton and other places, and only returning to their former haunts when some matter affecting the whole family fortune necessitated the sounding of the tocsin and a gathering together of the Clan.

Although, as is natural with lesser breeds, there were many minor convulsions inside the Miffkin family, due to such human causes as jealousy, envy and other uncharitableness, the Miffkins always clung together in the event of a major disturbance—any event, that was, which threatened the dynasty as a whole. But things had been quiet and uneventful in that direction for some time now, and the Cheltenham, Bournemouth, Bath and Paignton households had remained unruffled. Moreover, it was generally agreed that the present ruler in Whitehall, Sir Obadiah, was very competent, even for a Miffkin. Obadiah was up to all the tricks; no one could reasonably expect to get the better of Obadiah. If a concensus of opinion had been taken throughout the Miffkin family, it would have been generally conceded that, taking everything into consideration, no better representative of the Miffkin Clan had ever been in Whitehall than Obadiah.

For Obadiah was pre-eminently "safe." He could be relied upon. He would never let the Family down. He

combined the traditional Miffkin cunning with the traditional Whitehall cautiousness in the most remarkable manner. He could uproot a Minister or cause a Cabinet to fall and he would not turn a hair, retaining the same blandness of manner that caused him to appear the most unruffled person in the whole of Whitehall. Oh, Obadiah was all right—there probably had never been a more Miffkinian Miffkin, a more truly representative specimen of the breed.

It was only natural that possessing (and wielding) the power he had, Sir Obadiah should have his pride. Consequently, when he received an agitated letter from his sister, Winifred, to the effect that his nephew Theodore contemplated bringing disgrace upon the sacred name by working for the Northern Radio Company, a flow of something which in anyone else might have been mistaken for blood, could be seen creeping slowly up his waxen-hued face.

In moments of great stress (such as when he read of any class of workers striking for a living wage, or more tolerable conditions), Sir Obadiah had the habit of clenching his hands. He clenched them after re-reading his sister's letter.

He did more, being a Miffkin; he wrote a short letter in reply, asking Winifred to dine at The Boltons the following evening.

Closeted alone with his sister in the room which he used as a study, Sir Obadiah listened patiently to her story.

"His name will get into the papers; it will be bandied about by everybody. Of course, he isn't a Miffkin, except by marriage . . ."

"Need you remind me of that, Winifred?" retorted Obadiah.

His tone was sharp. He liked this particular sister as well as any Miffkin could be expected to like anybody outside himself, but he could not forget that she had linked

herself in marriage with an outsider—a rank outsider. He had been against her marriage with this low stockbroker fellow, Whinney, young as he was at the time; and he was not grieved when Whinney had died early, leaving her to bear the heat and burden of the day (to say nothing of three small children). The disgrace she had brought upon the Clan by mating outside the Civil Service had taken a lot of living down, but—he was always guided by Christian principles, he hoped—he had taken Winifred back into the fold, and had been repaid by observing that, although a Whinney by marriage, she had remained a Miffkin at heart.

“The publicity!” wailed Mrs. Whinney, hanging her head in shame.

Sir Obadiah bit his lip. Winifred had struck the right chord. If there was one thing in modern life which Sir Obadiah abhorred, it was publicity of any kind—especially the more blatant types as represented by the Press and the Wireless. Working like a mole underground, pulling strings secretly, he not only loathed but feared publicity of any kind.

“Yes, Winifred, it is the publicity I am thinking about myself,” he replied.

“It is bound to get out that Theodore is your nephew,” she wound up.

Sir Obadiah put his finger-tips together.

“I must see what can be done,” he said.

“Oh, thank you, Obadiah,” replied Mrs. Whinney, pronouncing the ridiculous name as though it were the most enchanting music; “I knew I could rely on you.” With that, she departed.

Now it is quite possible that the reader with the coldly-analytical mind (and, judging by the letters which authors receive, there are many readers with coldly-analytical minds), may ask at this stage: “Why should any woman behave in this fashion? Wasn’t she anxious for her son to

earn more money so that she and her daughters could buy more clothes? Then why, with this pleasing prospect looming immediately ahead, did she kick up so much fuss, and go rushing off to her brother to complain?"

A fair-enough question; and here is the answer—or, rather, a series of answers. To begin with, Winifred Whinney was a woman. That, it may be argued, is already a self-evident fact; but how many times has it been observed that, after a woman has created a fuss over something which she evidently considers as being important, she abruptly and mysteriously changes her tactics when a man (Theodore Whinney in this case) has worked his fingers to the bone in order to gratify her whim?

Answer No. 2: Mrs. Whinney had been deeply shocked by the unexpected show of spirit on the part of her hitherto dutiful and obedient son. Such rebellion assumed in her eyes deliberate blasphemy, and she could not condone it. After ruling Theodore with a metaphorical rod of iron for thirty-five years, it was difficult to envisage a future in which her authority was to be challenged at every turn.

Answer No. 3: She really did consider broadcasting to be vulgar. This had dated from the unfortunate evening when Agatha, feeling depressed, and requiring the stimulus of something or other, had turned the knob of the set with reckless abandon, and had found herself listening to the indescribable wailing of a female crooner—the famous Deborah Dunn (appearing by permission of Bert Hilarious) in the current broadcast of the Light Entertainment Feature, "Thursday at 7.45."

Deborah Dunn, who had a national reputation amongst the dead pans, was giving a very realistic impersonation of a dying duck caught in a thunderstorm, when Mrs. Whinney unexpectedly came into the room.

"What on earth is that supposed to be, Agatha?" she asked, naturally enough.

"It's part of a programme I believe they call 'Thursday at 7.45,' mother, dear."

Mrs. Whinney reacted quickly.

"Turn the thing off immediately!" she ordered. "How anyone in their right minds can listen to such a beastly noise, I can't understand. It's like the horrible sounds cats make."

After that, the column in the *Times*, setting forth the day's wireless programmes was always most carefully scrutinized beforehand, and only carefully-selected items such as the Evening News and an occasional Talk, generally of a religious type, were allowed to intrude on the serenity of the Parliament Hill Gardens flat. That Theodore, her only son, should even be contemplating giving his support to such a deplorable institution as the Northern Radio Company induced in Mrs. Whinney a feeling of the most acute anguish.

Answer No. 4 (and the most important of all): Mrs. Whinney, keenly appreciative of the outstanding position her brother occupied, not only as the reigning head of the Miffkin Clan, but also in the larger world outside, had invariably made it a point to consult Sir Obadiah on any matter involving her comfort and sense of pride. She knew that Sir Obadiah liked to have this honour paid him; he regarded it as his right, and, moreover, it satisfied his vanity. Finally, Mrs. Whinney hoped that Sir Obadiah, having no daughters of his own, might be induced to think of Agatha and Ida (both of whom seemed pretty hopeless propositions now from a matrimonial point of view), when the time came for him to make a will.

Altogether, you see, Mrs. Whinney had had her reasons for rushing off to seek her brother's advice and help, and if these do not appear entirely adequate to the owners of coldly-analytical minds, they were entirely adequate to Mrs. Whinney. Having said that, we must

now leave the question, for there are more important matters pending.

Moles are not only secretive but industrious creatures. What is more, they are persistent. Sir Obadiah Miffkin, being the very King of the Moles (human variety), lost no time in fulfilling the promise he had made to his sister in her distress. It will be recalled that at the end of the interview with her, he had said: "I must see what can be done."

There was only one thing to be done, in his view: that was to go straight to the fountain-head; in other words, Sir Harry Titmarsh, C.B.E., who had supreme power at Northern House, and who owed his present position in a great measure to Sir Obadiah, must be called in. (The strings that are pulled in this free and enlightened democracy!)

Being a mole, the chief of the Miffkins did not make the stupid mistake of going in person to Northern House; he obeyed the rules by working in the dark, sending a note marked "Personal" to Sir Harry Titmarsh, C.B.E. In this note he invited the Big Noise in Broadcasting to dinner at The Boltons on the following evening.

Over the alleged port, he unbuttoned himself: A nephew of his, by the name of Whinney, was about to make a fool of himself by speaking on the wireless. What did Sir Harry Titmarsh think about it?

Used to having his slightest wish granted almost before it had been uttered, Sir Obadiah now received one of the major shocks of his life; he could not remember anything to parallel it since his Minister of the Moment (but what else could be expected of a Labour representative?) had dared to question one of his rulings on the subject of Reconstruction in the Act of 1943.

He had expected the man he had pushed into his present

eminence to lend a willing ear and to say: "If there is anything I can do . . ."

But nothing of this sort occurred; from lying prostrate at his feet (as he had anticipated), the visitor practically flew at his throat. It was most disconcerting.

"I see nothing to be ashamed of, Sir Obadiah, even if your nephew does broadcast," stated the guest; "on the contrary, if broadcasting in this country is to retain the respect and confidence of the masses, we, who have control of this great instrument of publicity, entertainment and enlightenment, must see to it that we recruit the best possible brains to its service. That is why, after reading the private reports, I am delighted to know that Professor Theodore Whinney is about to join us."

Sir Obadiah's reply was ominous.

"I see," he said, and pursed his thin lips. Whitehall would have known by this that the days of Sir Harry Titmarsh, C.B.E., were numbered; that his neck was practically on the block, and that the executioner was about to swing his axe.

Sir Harry did not seem to realize his danger. The truth was that he had felt for some time an ever-increasing dislike for this sandy-haired, horse-faced, thin-nosed Whitehall Slug; and if the latter imagined for a single moment that he was going to scrap what promised to be the brightest ornament of the forthcoming "Here Are the Answers" Feature—which Sir Harry by now honestly considered had been born out of his own brain—he was due for a disappointment. Was he going to allow this Whitehall hireling to dictate to him? He didn't imagine so.

That was all the Chief of the Miffkin Clan said, but his intimates would have agreed that it was enough. These same intimates might have added that none—or very few—

had ever dared to oppose Sir Obadiah Miffkin and live to fight another battle.

Conversation languished after this brief passage-of-arms, and the guest, already bored, made the speediest departure possible consistent with good manners.

Sir Obadiah watched the car drive away with a baleful, ominous eye. So this vulgar fool thought he could defy him, did he? Well, time would prove.

But when he got back to the room which he used as a study, and began to review the affair in all its aspects, the Whitehall luminary came to the conclusion that, much as he hated the man who had just eaten his salt and broken his bread, he disliked the original cause of the trouble still more. He had always considered Theodore Whinney a blot on the family escutcheon, and now striking evidence to this effect had been supplied. There were many causes for his disregard: first of all, he had intensely disliked Theodore's father; then there had been the boy's obstinate refusal to join the Civil Service; and now he had the effrontery to go before a microphone—the thing was called a microphone, he understood—and proclaim his shame to the whole world.

Sir Obadiah could already hear the whispers along the miles of Whitehall Corridors: "That's old Miffkin's nephew . . . I wonder what old Miffkin thinks about it?" and many other such remarks.

Then there were the masses—those same masses which the fool, Titmarsh, had talked so glibly about. He loathed the masses—nasty-smelling people, useful only when there was a war to be fought—and to think that it might drift through to the Head that this new broadcaster was actually related to the great Sir Obadiah Miffkin, the power behind the Cabinet—why, it was *lèse majesté*; nothing less.

It might even lead to Anarchy.

Finally, it was intolerable; it would have to be stopped.

But how?

We must leave Sir Obadiah meditating, running his spatulate forefinger along his thin lips as an aid to thought.

CHAPTER V

THE TRUMPET-CALL TO FAME

HORACE WIMBUSH looked round. He felt like an amateur lion-tamer who had successfully survived his first performance. It had left him perspiring freely, it is true, but he was still alive—which, after all, was the main thing.

Round him were seated the members of the Panel selected to serve at the first session of the new feature, on the success or failure of which his whole future at Northern House depended.

They were an oddly-assorted bunch. Heading the list was Gains Ogilvie, the eminent biologist, who had given his consent mainly because he thought the "Here Are the Answers" rallies would give him an opportunity for working off some of his sardonic views on mankind. (Devoted to animals, Ogilvie had a very dim view of humanity, which he considered—and perhaps rightly so—as the lowest form of organic life.)

On the opposite side of the table was Capt. Tom Rafferty, the great authority on deserts, and world-travel generally. Rafferty was said to have had so many bizarre adventures, especially in hitherto untrodden parts of the earth, that had Sir Richard Burton of the Arabian Nights' Entertainments been still alive, he would inevitably have changed his occupation, probably taking up bee-keeping. Rafferty had been roped-in in order to supply the man-of-the-world—the genuine raconteur touch.

Third in the list came Oscar Ballinger. Ballinger was a scientist; what he didn't know about science was not worth learning, according to his own reckoning; and, to prove this, he had published a number of books which his *confrères* had wholeheartedly condemned, but which the lay public (to everybody's surprise) had bought in astounding numbers; so big had been the sales of the latest of the series, in fact, that the strange spectacle of the publisher performing hand-springs on the pavement in Markover Street, outside his office, could have been observed one morning.

Fourth on the list was the editor of a famous Review. Benjamin Wenke was a tall, dark, excessively-hairy man with a whiplash tongue. This, he had been warned by Horace Wimbush, he would have to keep under the strictest control whilst he was on the air. Accustomed to running down everything, he was already framing a few caustic phrases about his new colleagues as he waited for the Red Light to show, and for the Announcer to tell the listening millions that the much-boomed and generally publicized new feature of the Northern Radio Company was actually about to begin.

Finally, there was Theodore Whinney. Theodore felt strangely out of the picture, and if it had not been for Gains Ogilvie, whom he did not want to let down, coupled with the determination not to allow his mother—who continued to be very difficult—to have the laugh of him, he would probably have thrown his hand in, and rushed back to Grantley University.

During the lunch at a famous hotel over which Horace Wimbush had presided, it had been difficult to inculcate the feeling of comradeship and general bonhomie which Wimbush considered was so essential to his strange team working amicably together when they came to face the microphone, and the going for the first half-an-hour had been decidedly sticky. To make matters worse, Whinney

had been placed next to Benjamin Wenke, who, seeing what he considered to be a particularly poor specimen of the human species he so heartily despised, placed in such close proximity, proceeded to give his vitriolic tongue full rein. Theodore could not be quite sure that he himself was the target for the violent abuse and ridicule of the human race, but he had grave doubts. This did not help, of course, and by the time Wimbush announced that the moment had come for the trek to Northern House, he was in a state of general dithers. His underclothes seemed to be sticking to his skin, whilst his tongue was certainly cleaving to the roof of his mouth.

The tremendous moment had come: the Announcer, a fussy little man, who looked, in his scantily-cut dinner jacket, as though he were attending the Annual Dinner of the Gas Workers' (Clerical Branch) Union, stepped up to the microphone, and said in the plummy tones peculiar to his kind: "Ladies and Gentlemen, the Northern Radio Company have pleasure in announcing the first in a series of entirely new programmes, the general title of which we call 'Here Are the Answers.' A number of celebrities—each famous, in his own particular field, have met here in Northern House to-night in order to supply the answers to questions sent in by the listening public. It should be clearly understood that none of the panel of experts seated round the table in this studio has seen any of the questions which the Chairman will shortly read out to them, and that all the answers supplied will therefore be strictly impromptu and could not possibly have been thought out beforehand. That said, it is now my duty to hand the microphone over to the Chairman, Horace Wimbush, whose duty it will be to put the questions and—er—keep order! Ladies and Gentlemen, 'Here Are the Answers!'"

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The question—it had only been approved after very careful thought and much soul-searching—was: “Can woman be considered in any way equal to man?”

Naturally enough, the chairman, seeing that the subject seemed directly up his street, called first upon Gains Ogilvie. But the biologist, for some reason which Horace Wimbush could not understand, did not appear interested; indeed, he went further and poured scorn, not only on the query itself, but on the listener who had sent it in. “It’s a stupid question, and I don’t propose wasting the time of the Panel in trying to answer it,” he wound up.

Wimbush snapped a curt “Very well. Is there anyone else who would care to offer an answer to this question, which I myself feel sure interests many millions of people . . .”

“Not *thinking* people,” broke in the aggravating biologist.

“Mr. Ogilvie says he does not consider that *thinking* people would be interested in this question, but—oh, I see that Professor Whinney has put his hand up as a sign that he wishes to contribute to this particular discussion. Yes, Professor Whinney, we shall all be delighted to hear your views on the subject of Woman’s Superiority or Inferiority to Men. Professor Whinney . . .”

Theodore Whinney spoke for a full five minutes. What he said not only caught, but held the attention of everybody who listened to it—from Sir Harry Titmarsh, C.B.E., who had switched on in his library at Hanover Terrace, Regent’s Park, down to Mrs. Brentwood, living at 222, Acacia Grove, Ponder’s End.

Mrs. Brentwood first.

“Blimey, I never ’eard anyfink like it—s’elp me, I ’aven’t,” she declared, turning round to her daughter-in-law.

The latter tossed her head.

“Disgustin’, I calls it,” she declared; “’ow you can go on listenin’ to such rubbish, I don’t know, Maw.”

These were the opinions of Mrs. Amelia Brentwood,

charwoman by profession, and her daughter-in-law, Tilda, who had married Bill Brentwood in a moment of absent-mindedness five years before and had only regrets (and two small children, both of whom took after their father unfortunately) to remind her of the fact, Bill himself having disappeared into the blue three years before.

The opinion of that other supposed authority, Sir Harry Titmarsh, C.B.E., was different, but equally symptomatic.

"Remarkable!" he heard himself saying when Theodore Whinney had come to an end. "But I wonder what the Public will think?"

He need not have worried: the millions of listeners had started to listen to the new feature hoping against hope for the best, but prepared—as usual—for the worst. To the half-baked, eager for assimilating any kind of knowledge no matter how indigestible it might prove, here was a golden opportunity, and they had all rushed home eager to be in at the birth.

Until Whinney had started to give his contribution, a general disappointment had been experienced by the majority of the listeners-in. "It was all so dull," as Nancy Binks, 197, Blinkers' Lane, Penge, had put it.

But it certainly wasn't dull directly Theodore Whinney took the floor. To begin with, there was his extraordinarily virile voice—a voice that was destined before very long to exercise a more potent influence over the womanhood of Britain than any other male vocal organ within living memory. Secondly, there was the deep learning—deep learning put over, let it be added, not in any dry, academic fashion, but in a manner which could be more or less understood by even the deadest of the dead pans. Finally, there was the unmistakable if illusive note of contempt for the rest of the world with which the speaker coloured his remarks. It was as though Whinney had said in as many words: "I don't care what anyone else may say on this

subject; this is what *I* think, and the rest of you can go to Hell."

The general result was an overwhelming personal triumph for the teacher of obscure (and entirely useless) sciences at Grantley University. At the moment that Theodore Whinney started to talk into the microphone at Northern House, he was an unknown; by the time he had finished his first contribution, he was a Celebrity. Those Who Mattered in Northern House admitted (somewhat to their own consternation, it must be conceded) that they had unearthed that very rare bird, a born broadcaster, a man whom the General Public would probably take straightaway to their bosoms. The General Public, for its part, listened spell-bound. "Who was the fellow?" they asked of each other. "He knows his stuff all right!"

The explanation of this apparent miracle can be given very simply: the British listening-in public was starved of Personality amongst the regular broadcasters to whom they listened. (There was a very widespread rumour in Northern House to the effect that, directly a broadcaster looked like capturing the masses, he was politely but firmly shoved off the air on some pretext or other. Names were cited in support of this statement.) Be that as it may, those who listened-in to the first Session of the "Here Are the Answers" feature—or at least eighty-five per cent. of them—leapt spontaneously to the conclusion that "this fellow Whinney" was a natural broadcasting "star"—a born radio personality. And they reacted accordingly, sending in their letters to Northern House by the hundreds of thousands by the first available post, and informing the High-Up Wallahs that, whilst the Feature itself was not so hot, the man with the remarkable voice—Whinney was the name, wasn't it?—was a sensational success.

Those letters were so much healing balm to Horace

Wimbush. They represented a long-deferred triumph; they were soothing to his sorely-bruised soul. For years he had waited for such a moment; and its savour was all the sweeter because he had practically given up all hope of its arrival after all those long, barren years.

True, the chief tribute in all these letters of eulogy was directed not to himself, or, indeed, to the Feature which had been born in his own brain, but to the man he had roped in at the last moment; but nothing could rob him of his own sense of achievement. After all, if it had not been for him, Professor Theodore Whinney would still have been a nonentity, deeply sunk in the obscurity of his post at Grantley University. *His* had been the hand which had lifted Whinney up; *his* had been the propulsive power. Together, Whinney and he would march to as yet quite unheard-of triumphs. Generous in his now richly-mellow mood, Wimbush felt strangely drawn to the new radio star—the star who would never have been heard on the air but for his own efforts.

After the letters, the Press. Whilst the more staid organs, like *The Times*, treated the new Feature with a strict regard to space, the more popular papers like the *Daily Banner*, the *Looking-Glass* and the *Morning Mail*, eager to exploit anything fresh in the way of news, let loose their special writers and gave them a free hand. The result was the usual astonishing farrago of nonsense. According to their own peculiar view-point and special style of writing, the men and women who always decorated their work with their names spread themselves—in the case of the *Daily Banner*, to the extent of a whole column.

In one respect, they were all alike: they ignored the Feature, dismissing "Here Are the Answers" with a scornful gibe at the hollow pretence of the Northern Radio Company "trying to go all-educational in its senile middle-age," and

concentrated on the "amazing new radio star that had been born over-night." Needless to say, flags were all unfurled on behalf of Professor Theodore Whinney.

To quote:

Here at long last is someone speaking on the wireless to whom it is a pleasure to listen: Professor Theodore Whinney is not only a veritable mine of knowledge, much of it strange and fascinating, but he is also a distinct personality. Without him, the much-boasted new Feature "Here Are the Answers" would have been a damp squib; with Whinney at the microphone, it promises to be a joy for millions of average radio-fans.

That was Hector Wyoming in *The Morning Mail*.

Susannah Byle in the *Looking-Glass*, true to her sex, dealt mainly with the new star from the feminine angle.

Millions of women up and down the country must have thrilled to the deep, virile, all-male voice of this new radio star launched so unexpectedly in the somewhat inept new Feature "Here Are the Answers." Amidst the bewildering welter of emasculated, over-refined vocal tones of the regular contributors to the Northern Radio Company, the voice of Professor Theodore Whinney—remember the name, girls!—rang out like a trumpet-call. Will he claim your future attention? I'm willing to bet my second-best pair of silk stockings that he will.

They proved true words: long before he had waked from an uneasy night's rest, Professor Theodore Whinney had become a nation-wide topic of conversation.

CHAPTER VI

AFTERMATH

ONE cannot have an upheaval of this magnitude without a cataclysmic aftermath resulting. As a matter of fact, in Theodore Whinney's instance, there were not one but a whole series of aftermaths.

Let us, as an impartial historian, examine the case of Whinney himself by way of a start.

He had sped straight home to the Parliament Hill Gardens' flat after the broadcast at Northern House, and had gone at once to his bedroom. Not a word could (1) Mrs. Whinney; (2) Agatha Whinney; or (3) Ida Whinney get out of him. What was perhaps even more momentous was that he had completely ignored any question of supper. Like many small men, Theodore was by nature a hearty eater in the usual way; and conquering the worst side of her nature, Mrs. Whinney—who was more resentful than ever that her son should persist in his abandoned ways—had provided a modicum of cold boiled ham with cucumber to match, against his return. That such good—and in these days, expensive—food should be ignored (it wouldn't be wasted, of course; she would see to that) was a scandal.

On any normal occasion, Theodore would have interpreted correctly the expression on his mother's face; just as, on any normal occasion, he would have wolfed the cold boiled ham (with cucumber to match); but this emphatically was not a normal occasion. To begin with, although this was the merest trifle, and had only an indirect bearing on the main issue, he had lunched more heartily that day than he could remember ever having lunched before in his life. At the Pontifex Hotel, Park Lane, the originator of "Here Are the Answers" feature, equipped for once with an adequate expense account, had got the waiters, swarming like so many bees, to ply Theodore with so many rich and unaccustomed foods that even his tough stomach had been almost turned. Almost; not quite; and, rallying with true Whinnian stoutness, it had not only retained the gorgeous sustenance, but had distilled its juices, so that the new broadcaster had had nourishment throughout the rest of the day.

That is not to say, however, that Theodore, ravaged by the ordeal through which he had passed, would not have

been ready for a fresh supply of foodstuffs by the time he reached home, had the circumstances been different; but the truth was that the Professor at Grantley University had scarcely any hold on life as he had known it even a few hours before. He walked like a man in a dream; he moved like an automaton. It was not until he had locked his bedroom door behind him that he came to something like his normal self. Then, recklessly putting a fresh shilling into the allotted slot, he sat before the tiny gas-fire, wondering if this man clasping his head between his hands was really himself.

Down below, the Whinney female fraternity conferred. In spite of their mother's protests, Agatha and Ida had insisted on tuning-in to the "Here Are the Answers" broadcast, and it had been obvious even to their naturally-prejudiced minds that their brother had scored an outstanding success, knocking the bowling to all parts of the field, whilst his colleagues had always been scraping for runs. Agatha, when the time signal for the News signified the end of the first session of the Feature which for the next few months was destined to hold the nation in thrall, expressed the opinion that she was not surprised at her brother's triumph—"It must always be remembered that he is a Whinney," were her exact words—but Ida, for her part, announced her stupefaction that Theodore "should know so much; after all, he does very little talking here at home."

"That is because he has to do so much at Grantley," Agatha replied.

"What shall we tell mother?" went on Ida. "After all, she must be told something, I suppose? She professes not to be interested, but she'll never sleep to-night until she knows the worst."

"We must tell her the truth—of course," was the unpromising retort.

"What? That Theodore has apparently been a tremendous success?"

"Yes."

"It may kill her!"

"My dear Ida," chided Agatha, "what a child you are! Where's your Primer on Psychology? Don't you understand that shame would be far more likely to kill mother if she heard that Theodore had been a failure?"

"You're too clever for me," stated Ida; "very well, directly she comes in, we'll tell her."

Mrs. Whinney's reaction to the news that her only son had practically set Northern House on fire during the previous hour was startling.

"I never want to hear his name mentioned again," she said; "that is my wish, and I shall expect it to be observed—strictly observed."

"Oh, mother!" protested Ida.

"That is my wish, and I must ask you both to see that it is respected," persisted Mrs. Whinney; "remember, I am your mother."

"We are not likely to forget that, darling," supplied Agatha, with an unexpected sense of humour; "but, unless I'm much mistaken, it will be Theodore who will be having the final word in this house from now on."

Mrs. Whinney whinnied like a frightened horse.

"Why, Agatha, what an extraordinary thing to say," exclaimed her mother. "I have always been the head of this house, and I intend to remain so. Is it likely that I should relinquish my claim—my just claim—to Theodore?"

"Perhaps not," replied Agatha; "but unless I am very much mistaken, we shall all now see a very different Theodore from the one we have hitherto known."

"Stuff and nonsense!" came the vigorous protest. "As though a mere broadcast—if that is the correct term—could have any effect on a person's character!"

"We shall see," was the Cassandran reply.

And now for that Pillar of the State, that upholder of Custom, that hater of Change, that exemplifier *par excellence* of Never Do To-day What Can Be Put Off Until To-morrow, that Despiser of the Masses, that Emblem of all that is Backward, Snobbish, Reactionary and Downright Stupid in the British character—what was Sir Obadiah Miffkin's reaction to the sudden blaze of glory by which his recalcitrant nephew had been so suddenly and unexpectedly surrounded? What were *his* views on the subject?

It may be argued, and with some justice, that a Civil Servant of Sir Obadiah's prominence would be the very last person to become aware of any convulsion in the life of the Country. For Sir Obadiah, as the supreme tyer of red tape, the supreme withholder of liberty and the supreme restrictor of public enjoyment everywhere (towards the end of the Second Great War he had encouraged the massed legions of bureaucrats, both large and small, to believe that the hold they had secured upon the Public during the previous five years would never be released) considered himself above anything which affected the Common Herd. True, his particular Government Department maintained (at considerable expense to the citizenry) a Press Section whose duty it was to clip out of the public prints any items bearing in any way on the work of this particular Department of Government mis-rule, and concentrate these into a daily *résumé*. One copy was placed, as a kind of religious rite, on the desk of each and every important official, including, of course, that of Sir Obadiah, but never within living memory had any one of these officials, including, of course, The Miffkin himself, been known even to take a passing glance at the thing. It had always been considered bad form in the Department of United Lethargics—of

which Sir Obadiah was the Head Cook and Bottle-washer—to give as much as a fleeting heed to what the Country as a whole was (1) saying; (2) doing; or (3) even thinking. When public opinion had become too strong in the past—that was when the newspapers retained a certain independence through being owned privately and not by Trusts which crushed all robust opinion out of them—then word would be passed to one of a carefully-selected number of M.P's., and Sir George Brassbound (or Sir Angus Tintwittle) would get up in the House with a great show of indignation and protest with the utmost vehemence that it was monstrous that any low-minded, ignorant journalist should possess the colossal effrontery of daring to criticise the workings of the Department of United Lethargics, that throbbing hive of the Civil Service. Like those of Providence Itself, the said workings of the Department of United Lethargics were often inscrutable, but was it not the traditional prerogative of a Government Department to be inscrutable? And could—indeed, *would*—any critic dare to say that because the said workings were inscrutable, they were not all the more beneficent and wonderful on that account? (This challenge was invariably met with a chorus of "*Hear, hears*" from the back-benchers representing the press-ganged clique of nonentities of whichever Party was in power.) It was a nice thing for a strong and responsive democracy, such as they were fortunate enough to possess in this great country (*loud, resounding cheers*), if a Branch of the Government doing such invaluable work as the Department of United Lethargics was doing, was to be held up to public ridicule and contempt by any ink-stained penny-a-liner from Fleet Street! At which, the representatives of the free and enlightened electors (who, in their innocence, considered they had sent their selected candidates to Westminster in order to study their interests and not to play the fool with the destiny of a great nation) could always be relied

upon to raise vigorous cries of approval. Sir George Brassbound (or Sir Angus Tintwittle, as the case might be: they had got into the habit of doubling for each other) would then sit down with a complacent smile on his face. The farce had gone down as well as ever! Really, it was almost beyond belief.

But to return to Sir Obadiah in person. As already intimated, he was not a person to be trifled with, especially when the question of his personal dignity was concerned. And in this particular case, Sir Obadiah not only considered that his personal dignity had been grossly affronted, but there was the further question of personal vengeance. Yes, beneath that detached, impersonal, almost inhuman facial immobility which was his, Sir Obadiah nursed secret fires. Being what he was, a very monument of the Civil Service, perhaps the highest monument in the whole of Whitehall, he had always kept these inward conflagrations under the very strictest control, but now, as he sat in his private room at The Boltons, after returning from a hard day at the office of the United Lethargics—10 A.M. to 4 P.M., with two hours off for lunch—his usual saffron-coloured cheeks had changed into a dull, reddish hue, his usual half-hooded eyes flamed, and altogether he was not a very pleasant spectacle. Not to put too fine a point on it, Sir Obadiah Miffkin presented a distinctly sinister impression at that moment. He looked the type of person that any sensible man, woman or even child, would have crossed the road to avoid.

Sir Obadiah, it is pretty safe to say, would not have presented quite such a sinister impression if he had not felt so thoroughly thwarted. Thwarted was the word. Unused to being thwarted, he was deeply resentful, with the resultant changes of facial colour-scheme already stated. Accustomed to having his own way in everything, this present defying of his personal authority he regarded as intolerable.

That a whipper-snapper like his nephew Theodore should challenge him in this way was almost more than he could bear. Something had to be done—but what?

He had tried one method, but it had failed. How humiliating had been this reverse lingered in his memory. But he would deal with Sir Harry Titmarsh, that ungrateful renegade, later; the immediate problem was the visiting of punishment, the descending of the Heavy Hand of Authority, upon Theodore Whinney. The fellow had to be made to suffer.

Sir Obadiah's keenness in this direction would have been urgent enough in any event, but it had gathered considerable impetus, not to say momentum, during a chance conversation he had overheard that morning at the office. Going into a room occupied by three junior limpets (all clinging even at that early age with praiseworthy desperation to their jobs), he had been enabled—thanks to his rubber-soled shoes: he invariably wore rubber-soled shoes at the office—to catch a few fragments of speech which caused him to twitch as though a tooth had suddenly developed an unsuspected abscess.

The said fragments had run like this:

FIRST JUNIOR: "His name's Theodore Whinney. He's a Professor of sorts at Grantley."

SECOND JUNIOR (*with a laugh*): "That's only the half of it; he's the nephew of old Rumble-Guts!"

FIRST AND THIRD JUNIORS (*together*): "No, is that so? What a lark!"

SECOND JUNIOR: "Yes, he's old Rumble-Guts's nephew. I know that for a fact."

THIRD JUNIOR: "Well, he's got more brains in his little finger than R.G.'s got in his whole body."

SECOND JUNIOR: "I agree."

FIRST JUNIOR: "And he's a wizard as a broadcaster; if he were in America, he'd make a fortune."

THIRD JUNIOR: "He'll make one here if he's got any sense."

FIRST JUNIOR: "I'd laugh to see old Rumble-Guts's face now."

The speaker was denied that particular pleasure. The eavesdropper, having heard enough, stole away as silently as he had come. Whilst every instinct—every instinct but one, that was—urged Sir Obadiah to declare his presence and then visit condign punishment upon the three gossipers, yet even in that supreme crisis, the caution of a lifetime reasserted itself before he could fatally commit himself, and he made a characteristic fade-away. He would never forget the dire insult which had been paid him; nor would he forgive; but for the moment, he must remember that he was Sir Obadiah Miffkin, Head of the United Lethargics Department.

Yet as he walked slowly back along the corridor towards his own room, his ears continued to burn.

Many great men have had their secret woes. It is said that Julius Cæsar suffered from corns, whilst it is an established fact that Napoleon had stomach trouble. Whilst Sir Obadiah—to his credit—had never associated his own name with that of the former Terror of Europe (who set an obscure paper-hanger such a lamentable example), the time has come to record the melancholy truth (hitherto unknown), that the Head of the United Lethargics Department was a victim of incurable flatulence. He had consulted authority after authority—at one time the united might of Harley Street had concentrated on the problem—but no permanent relief had been secured. Whether it was that the food he swallowed took a rooted objection to the stomach in which it found itself, the fact remained that it almost immediately began to register its protest. These protests always took the form of low, despairing rumbles, distressing to hear. Visitors for the first time had been

known to observe (even on the sunniest of days) that "thunder was about," whilst newly-recruited shorthand-writers had resigned rather than be forced to take dictation from Sir Obadiah; they complained that his words were drowned by his rumbles.

As a man acutely aware of his personal dignity—this has already been stated, the writer is aware, but it is necessary to repeat it—Sir Obadiah was sorely embarrassed by his rumblings; if he had been one of the lesser breeds, there is no doubt he would often have consigned his complete digestive operations to the devil; but he was more than usually embarrassed during his journey back to his own quarters.

That vexation of spirit had been his all day; it was with him at this moment.

But there are compensations in most evils, and so it proved in the case of Sir Obadiah's rumblings. As a result of his troubled diaphragm, his brain was forced to put on an extra spurt. It did so now.

When he rose to go to his dinner—rumbling like a disgruntled volcano as he did so—he thought he had solved his problem. The wonder was he hadn't thought of it before.

CHAPTER VII

THEODORE GOES TEMPERAMENTAL

THEODORE WHINNEY awoke after a restless night to discover he was much too excited to eat any breakfast; in any case, he would have had no time, for in the tumult of the previous evening, he had forgotten to set his alarm-clock. He might have reproached his sisters for

allowing him to lie abed in this unorthodox manner; he might, on the other hand, have said to himself: "To the devil with teaching this morning; I feel I want some fresh air." Then he could have gone out on the adjacent Parliament Hill Fields and walked until something like a normal condition of mind ensued.

But old habits are hard to die; in the past, Theodore had not been in the custom of reproaching his sisters, and he had not been in the custom of slacking off in order to get some fresh air—much as he needed the latter commodity. So he repaired, as he had repaired many thousands of times before, to the dusty pile known as Grantley University, which, as all the world knows, is situate in the very heart of the most arid of all the London districts, that known to the postal authorities as W.C.1.

Professor Whinney had never been popular with the young he sought to instruct; for one thing, as already stated, he did not possess the faculty of keeping his classes in any kind of disciplinary order. Sometimes, indeed, these same classes might reasonably have been compared to so many bear-gardens. Fascinated by knowledge for its own sake, Theodore had professed in the past not to be discommoded by the fact that he was regarded as something the cat had brought in by the majority of the students—Youth being to him merely a more pimply manifestation of ordinary repulsive humanity—but, deep down within him, he had often secretly longed for a little affection on the part of those he was doing his best to equip for later battles with the world. He had long since given up any hope in this direction, but the wish had not entirely died.

It was, therefore, with mixed feelings of surprise and pleasure—the latter predominating—that he heard himself being greeted, directly he walked into the classroom, ten minutes after his arrival at the University, with shouts of "Good old Whinney!" "You showed 'em, Whinney!"

"How did you do it, Professor?" "Whinney beats the world!" together with other battle-chants, all very stimulating and uplifting. Theodore, warming to the applauders for the first time in his experience, contrasted this unexpected matutinal welcome with the markedly frigid reception given him by his colleagues on the University staff ten minutes previously.

Overwhelmed by the unwonted excitement, he pondered on the cause. But he was not allowed to ponder for long; even whilst the heartening cries were still throbbing on the air, the door opened and a familiar voice said: "Excuse me, Professor Whinney, but the Principal would like to see you immediately."

He turned to see the unpleasant face of Gladys Treadwell. The only remarkable fact about the latter was that she filled the part of private secretary to the Principal of Grantley University; that circumstance apart, it might quite fairly have been said that she did not exist—except that she moved, ate, drank, and presumably performed other physiological functions. But, in all other respects, she was just a blot on the landscape, being one of those unfortunate females who can only be classified under the general heading of "Woman" by wearing approximately the clothes peculiar to the sex. Theodore did not like her, and he was confident that Gladys did not like him. This feeling was now confirmed by the look she gave him. It was a look of badly-suppressed, malicious triumph—female variety.

His reply was short, but to the point.

"I'll come at once," he said.

The reply proved disturbing.

"That is certainly the Principal's intention, Professor," was what Gladys flung back.

The Principal of Grantley University—Aubrey P. Keeble, Doctor of Literature—was a dour and forbidding figure.

Perhaps because of his intense admiration for the great Victorian authors, he wore a beard. Not content with an ordinary amount of face-fungus, he had allowed this hirsute appendage to grow until, at the time of writing, it measured a full nine inches from the lowest part of the chin.

Keeble was proud of his beard; he liked to hear it referred to as "the finest thing of its kind since the 1850's"; he always made the most of it whenever he was photographed; he tended it carefully, using (so popular rumour had it) a special oil that had been prescribed by a man who had once been hairdresser to the late King Edward VII.

In the ordinary way, the Beard of The Keeble was uneventful and inoffensive, pursuing its placid way through life, and behaving as any decently-mannered beard should behave; but there were occasions when it took on a militancy—this was when its owner was badly upset, or otherwise swayed by anger—and then it threshed about tempestuously like a hurricane-tossed sea.

By the way it was behaving now, Theodore judged something had occurred to ruffle the Principal's feelings, although he never for one moment speculated that he himself was the cause of the upset.

Yet so it proved.

"I have asked you to come and see me this morning, Whinney," stated the Principal (with appropriate beard-tossings), "because I think it is due to the University to know why"—here the speaker paused to produce from behind his back, where it had been apparently lurking the while, a newspaper—"I think it is due, not only to the University, but to me, as its Head, to know why you have seen fit to trample the good name of Grantley in the dust in this degrading manner." (More and fiercer beard-threshings.)

Theodore opened his mouth.

"May I ask, in turn, sir, what exactly you mean?"

"This, Whinney, is what I mean." The copy of that

morning's *Daily Banner* was thrust before the eyes of the bewildered Professor. "Well, I am waiting for your explanation," pursued the relentless Keeble; "what have you to say?"

Theodore did not immediately reply. The perusal of such a sensational sheet as the *Daily Banner* ("we are justly proud of the largest circulation of any morning newspaper in the world") did not come yet within his daily curriculum; he had certainly heard of the *Daily Banner* (who hadn't?), but he had never read it.

But now he was amazed to see his name splashed in big type on its front page!

PROF. WHINNEY—NEW RADIO STAR

were the exact words. Prof. indeed!

Yet, although he would have been reluctant to admit it, the truth was that Theodore was moved; nay, more, he was deeply affected. Hitherto the despised, if not the actually rejected, he was now a success! The homely grub had changed into a glittering butterfly—that was if the *Daily Banner* was to be believed. Apart from the heartening words of Horace Wimbush immediately following the broadcast the night before, he had had no outside evidence that he had scored a personal triumph, except for the clamour of the students, although he knew inwardly that he had more than earned his initial fee.

"Well?"

The harsh injunction of The Keeble beat upon his ears discordantly. He resented it. He was not in the mood for discordancy of any kind just then; he was in the mood for lutes and dancing-girls swaying languorously but in perfect rhythm before him as he sat on a raised dais. He had, in fact, the old Eastern potentate complex.

Theodore looked upon that part of the face of The Keeble which was not entirely hidden by the fiercely-rustling beard.

"What do you expect me to say?" he asked.

The Keeble caught the note of challenge in the voice of the man he had always treated as a menial—a very minor menial. Already incensed, the Principal of Grantley University now boiled over.

"What do I expect you to say, Whinney?" he repeated; "why, I should have imagined that what common intelligence you may possess—which isn't much, I am afraid—would have enabled you to supply the answer without any prompting on my part. Do you think it fit and proper that you, a Professor at this University, should engage in antics of this grotesque description? 'Prof. Whinney, new radio star,'" the speaker went on to scoff, accompanying the scathing words by tearing up the copy of the offending *Daily Banner*. "Did you stop to think for a single moment before you entered on this mad enterprise? Did you reflect for a single fleeting second on the good name of the University of whose teaching staff you were a member?"

"No."

The beard of The Keeble swayed as though a frolicsome tempest had resolved to scatter every single hair of it to the four corners of the earth.

"You have the impudence to say 'No'! Did I hear you rightly, Whinney?"

"Certainly."

This single-word mode of reply was plainly getting The Keeble down; he began to wilt beneath it. He had anticipated a chastened demeanour on the part of the accused, a suitable servility; instead, he had found a soul eaten up with sinful pride. His anger threatened to break the bonds of his self-control; but, remembering the triumph which was shortly to be his, he temporarily restrained himself.

"I find your attitude deplorable," he said; "I expected you to evidence some regret for trampling the good name of Grantley in the dust . . ."

"That is the second time you have said that."

The rebuke coming from one of the most junior members of his staff made The Keeble jump as though a hornet had suddenly stung him.

"I shall report this to your uncle, Sir Obadiah Miffkin," he thundered.

Too late he realized the mistake he had made. He had betrayed himself; infinitely worse, he had betrayed Sir Obadiah, whose third cousin he had taken to his bed—such as it was—twenty years previously. Sir Obadiah had laid the most strict injunction on him that his name should not be brought into the matter. "Just call the young fool in, give him a good talking-to, tell him he has brought disgrace on the good name of the University—*and then dismiss him; give him the sack!*" That was what the man who had rung him up late the night before under a strict pledge of secrecy had said. As he had always deeply respected the speaker, and as, moreover, he had always disliked the condemned man personally, he had willingly agreed to carry out the instruction.

And now he was going to do it.

"Whinney——" he started, when he was interrupted by an uplifted hand.

"I know what you want to say, Keeble," said the man who, although condemned, refused to die; "but listen to me first. I RESIGN—DO YOU HEAR ME? I RESIGN!"

"You resign? But . . ."

"Yes, I know," and now the tone of Whinney corresponded to that which a naturally impatient man uses to a backward child; "but I've got in first. Do you think I was going to take your confounded impudence, to suffer your colossal conceit, to accept all your humiliating insults any longer? If you did, you are a much bigger fool than even I imagined you to be. . . . Wait!" as The Beard

threatened to break loose from its moorings. "If I had had to put up with you any longer, it would have been sufficient; but now I know that you have been talking to that congenital idiot, that imitation-man, that insufferable ass, Miffkin, about me—well, now I have the utmost pleasure in telling you to go to Hell and by the quickest route. Good morning!"

As he closed the door of the study behind him, Theodore caught a low moaning sound, dreadful to hear.

It might have come from The Keeble; on the other hand it might have come from The Beard.

He remained indifferent; he didn't trouble twopence where it came from.

CHAPTER VIII

THE BUGLE BLARES

THE man who first declared that nothing succeeds like excess certainly said a mouthful. Take the case of Theodore Whinney, for example: scarcely had he said good-bye to his students (who gave him a vociferous send-off), following on the hurling of the bomb at The Keeble, than the hall-porter of Grantley University rushed up Towzer Street, as Theodore strode briskly away into a larger world . . . placed a detaining hand on his shoulder, and said breathlessly: "Sorry to bother you, Mr. Whinney, but the telephone's just rung. It's the *Daily Bugle*; they want to speak to you; they say it's urgent."

Now observe how fickle and unreliable is human nature, even of the Grantley University hall-porter variety. If anyone had told Herbert Groom, the hall-porter in question, that he would have taken the trouble to chase a poor half-portion like Prof. Whinney up four hundred yards of hot

Towzer Street pavement on any cause whatever, he would emphatically and unhesitatingly have declared that person to be a ruddy liar with knobs on.

But the mind of Herbert Groom, like the minds of the rest of frail humanity, was forced to undergo a change. It was that powerful organ of the semi-illiterate masses, the *Daily Bugle*, which had caused the hall-porter at Grantley University to alter his Whinney outlook. Formerly he, together with the rest of the world, had taken a very dim, not to say jaundiced view of the Professor. Herbert Groom's own education had been rudimentary, and, as his private feeling was that much of the present unrest in the world was due entirely to the circumstance that millions of poor youths were being educated above their intelligence, he adopted a somewhat sardonic attitude to that seat of learning at which he earned his humble bread. His heroes were not the giants of the classroom, but the Titans of the football and cricket fields, and the gladiators of the prize-ring, ancient and modern.

But Herbert, all unbeknown to himself, was due to take a toss. Switching on to what he had imagined would be a Talk on "Famous Sportsmen I have known," by that recognized authority, T. T. Titmuss, the previous night, he had been electrified to hear the voice of the man he had previously held in such contempt—the voice of Professor Theodore Whinney, no less!

Something stayed his hand even while it was stretched out to turn the knob. Perhaps the arresting cause was stupefaction; perhaps the hesitation was prompted by the staggering flow of words which he heard issuing like an undammed river out of the mouth of the Professor; perhaps, again, it was a feeling of reflected pride—after all, he told himself, Whinney and he were both, in a way of speaking, playing for the same team; be the cause what it may, the essential and all-important fact is that Herbert Groom sat

the entire "Here Are the Answers" broadcast through—and enjoyed it!

To be more exact, he enjoyed the contribution Professor Theodore Whinney made to it. Even his strictly limited intelligence recognized that Whinney was the star-turn amongst the experts, and his sense of pride, strange as this was, developed the longer the broadcast lasted.

When it was over, and during the brief interval which elapsed before the News, he turned to his wife and said: "Well, I'll be jiggered! Who would 'ave thought the little mugger 'ad it in 'im?"

Mrs. Groom awoke out of the sleep into which the perpetually deep-booming voice of the man her husband was praising, fervently if ribaldly, had sent her, stifled a yawn, and replied: "It's time for a nice cuppa tea—would you like a nice cuppa tea, 'Erb?"

The hall-porter looked at her with disdain. Having somewhat belatedly recognized Professor Whinney's greatness, he had felt himself being lifted into a higher state. And to be dumped down again was distressing.

"'Aven' you got no soul, Gert?" he asked, harshly.

"Wot I can do with is a nice cuppa tea," was the devastating reply; "would you like a nice cuppa tea, 'Erb?"

Herbert Groom's reply is not to be set down here.

Theodore Whinney emerged from the telephone-booth in the hall of the University, whose bondage he had cast from him like so much mud, looking hot and bewildered.

Herbert Groom, who was in an advanced state of hero-worship by this time, regarded him anxiously.

"Feelin' all right, Professor?" he enquired.

"Yes, Groom, I'm all right, thank you."

"You look—if you'll excuse me sayin' so, sir—a bit under the weather. . Er—no bad news, I 'ope?"

Theodore Whinney sniggered.

"Bad news, my aunt!" he replied with startling clarity. "I've just been offered a fortune!"

"A fortune, sir?" The hall-porter did his best to try to grasp the full implication of the words, but did not wholly succeed.

"A fortune, Groom . . . get me a taxi, there's a good fellow; I've got to go down to Fleet Street and see the editor of the *Daily Bugle*."

The Editor of the *Daily Bugle* was a man carrying a tremendous load of responsibility. Comparatively young in years, he was old in Fleet Street experience; and the fact that the editing of a big national newspaper has been proved by reliable statistics to cause more grey hairs to sprout to the square inch than any other occupation, accounted for the haggard and worn expression which Hubert Tring wore.

There was an additional reason for the jumpy condition of Hubert Tring's nerves, which, whilst he continued to walk jerkily up and down his room, seemed to be like so many telephone wires all sending messages of gloom and disaster to his brain. Tring was recalling an interview he had had with Lord Blazer, the owner of the *Daily Bugle*, exactly a year ago that day.

Lord Blazer, a mammoth of a man with a voice to match, had talked to him in tornado-fashion on that occasion.

"I have made you the new Editor of the *Bugle*, Tring," he said, "because I have a hunch that you are the man to do what I want to be done—to get the paper a bigger circulation than the *Banner*. Do that, and you can have anything you like to ask me for—well, anything in reason, of course. Fail, and you get the sack. I hope I make myself plain. You have a year to do it. Here's the chance of a lifetime: take it."

At the time, the new Editor of London's second most successful newspaper had murmured what he deemed to

be appropriate words. He had to be careful what he said, for Lord Blazer lived up to his name; his temper was of the hair-trigger type, and the man himself was always threatening to go up in flame with accompanying smoke. Tring knew he was accepting a job which was pure dynamite: many had been called to the Editorship of the *Daily Bugle*, but none had lasted very long, the proprietor of the paper being one of those over-energetic individuals who keep a dog but prefer to do most of the barking themselves.

But in one respect, at least, Lord Blazer's word could be accepted: when he said a thing, he meant it. And he kept his promises.

So Tring had flung himself into his difficult task with all the ardour he possessed. A new broom, he followed the traditional custom of sweeping clean, dismissing several members of the *Bugle* staff and engaging others, luring the majority of the latter away from other Fleet Street papers by specious words and enhanced salaries.

But all he had done—and it had been considerable—during that year of strenuous toil had proved to be in vain. The *Banner* was still ahead of the *Bugle*; it was still able truthfully to boast that it had the largest circulation of any morning newspaper in the world—which meant, of course, that it sold several hundred thousand more copies each morning than the *Bugle*.

Hubert Tring groaned. He knew he had failed, and that day at twelve o'clock—which was in less than an hour's time—would come the reckoning; he would be out on his flat feet again, another victim sacrificed to the insensate ambition of a man who wanted the seemingly impossible.

That morning, as he hurriedly scanned the London newspapers, he had a new surging of Hope; it was probably preposterous on his part, but he did not intend to give up the struggle without staking one last card.

The snag was that he did not know whether that card

was still available; it seemed at least a 1,000-1 chance that one of his rivals, more especially the hated *Banner*, had got in first. But he could at least try. Then, if he were unlucky, he would accept the *coup de grâce*, which he felt the irate Lord Blazer would deliver to him directly he arrived at the office at noon, as gracefully as possible.

"Are you really Professor Theodore Whinney?"

The new radio star bristled.

"Of course, I am Whinney; why do you say that?"

The Editor of the *Daily Bugle* could have given him many replies to that one, but he knew that none of them would be tactful. Already he had made one perhaps unforgivable blunder, and a repeat dose would most certainly be fatal.

He side-stepped.

"The matter I wish to discuss with you, Professor, is of such paramount importance that I had to make certain of your identity beforehand," he replied.

He hoped to Heaven that would score as an emollient, and his spirits rose as he watched the frown disappear from the face of his visitor. It wasn't much of a face, it was true, even as modern pans went, but no doubt the photographic department could make it appear better than it actually was by the time it showed itself on the front page of the *Bugle*.

"I hope you are satisfied, Professor—and not offended?"

"I am satisfied—and not offended."

"Good!" Tring pulled the editorial chair nearer. Up to date, that same editorial chair had struck him as being composed of as many discomforts as Procrustes's bed, but now it felt so soft and comfortable that the mere thought of having to relinquish it, and within an hour at that, caused him acute mental anguish.

But wait, fluttering heart! So far, all seemed plain sailing, but he had been in Fleet Street too long not to

know the hidden man-traps and the cunningly-concealed pitfalls.

He came straight out into the open, and awaited the result with bated breath.

"Are you signed up yet to write for any London newspaper, Professor Whinney?"

The answer came pat, and sounded to Tring sweeter than any temple bells of far-off Mandalay.

"No."

Just one short, simple word, but how much it meant!

But wait, fluttering heart, a little longer! He still had to be cautious; success now appeared reasonably certain, but the cup might be snatched from his hand at the very last moment.

He plunged again.

"Would you care to write exclusively for the *Bugle*, at a starting salary of, say, £2,000 a year?"

"Make it £2,500, and I'm your man," was the staggering reply.

Tring was torn between two desires: the first was to curse himself for having named so high a figure in the first place, and the second was to fling himself on the caller's neck and call him blessed. Without waiting for either emotion to overpower him, he rang the bell for his secretary.

The following morning the *Daily Bugle* shrieked its delight. Right across the front page, using one-inch banner type, it said:

PROFESSOR WHINNEY JOINS THE *DAILY BUGLE*!

And below:

Readers of the *Daily Bugle* know from experience that nothing—and nobody—is too good for their favourite paper. That is why we have pleasure in announcing to-day that Professor Theodore Whinney, late of the Grantley University, and the man who scored such a tremendous success, startling

millions of listeners by the vast extent of his knowledge, during the first broadcast of the Northern Radio Company's new feature, "Here Are the Answers," has agreed to write exclusively for the *Daily Bugle*.

We are confident that this announcement will be received with the greatest possible interest by our readers.

Sure enough, it was—and not only by the two-and-a-half millions or so who bought the paper every morning; Fleet Street itself was stood on end. Whilst Lord Blazer, after a preliminary tirade against the madness of the Editor he had intended to sack, rejoiced at the "scoop" which the *Bugle* had secured, there were gloomy faces and bitter recriminations in the executive offices of his rivals. In particular, the Managing Director of the *Daily Banner* fiercely upbraided the Editor of that paper for what he called "astonishing lack of enterprise."

Meanwhile, the world had changed for Hubert Tring. After a long spell of bad luck, the wind had taken a favourable course. Already in his imagination he could forecast the future: the public had been for a long time without a popular hero, and, although even the much touched-up photograph of Professor Theodore Whinney which stared at the world from the front page of the *Bugle* that morning did not look very heroic, yet he was confident that the astonishing welcome which had been given to Whinney as a broadcaster would rebound on the circulation of the *Bugle* and send it soaring.

Tring was entirely objective about it; if anyone had suggested that he had been actuated by any but the most sordid motives—the keeping of his job, and scoring off his bitter competitors—he would have laughed in the man's face. Whether the public as a whole would benefit—morally, spiritually or even educationally—from reading Professor Theodore Whinney's outpourings in the *Bugle*, never entered into his calculations; all he was concerned

with was obtaining the exclusive newspaper services of the Celebrity of the Moment, and reaping a rich reward out of him in the matter of daily sales.

The Earnest Thinker—if the type has not entirely died out—may be inclined to grieve over such a statement, but a moment's reflection should convince him that this attitude of Hubert Tring was merely symptomatic of the way the world as a whole is going. It is part—and only part—of the price we all have to pay for what is euphemistically termed "Progress." In those dim, far-off days before the coming of the motor-car and the aeroplane—the greatest Curse Science has inflicted on us so far—men strove for success in different ways, and used different methods. Then they did not lay awake thinking out means by which they could cut other men's throats; instead, they planned leisurely and in quiet contentment how they could improve their lot. But that was before the world had become a Bedlam and when Life itself had something left of graciousness. So Hubert Tring, servant of the machine-age and the general craziness which it ushered into existence, robbing the latter of all serenity, should not be unduly blamed; a victim of the universal craving for going somewhere or other (it didn't particularly matter where), at the fastest speed possible, he either had to travel the same way himself or perish.

But enough: this is a tale designed to beguile the passing hour, and not a treatise on the general cock-eyedness of the modern world.

To return to our muttons.

CHAPTER IX

THEODORE IS ADAMANT

THEODORE WHINNEY walked out through the heavy swing-doors of the *Daily Bugle* office (being ostentatiously saluted by the Commissionaire *en route*) into the teeming crowds of Fleet Street, feeling that he was stepping on air. So much had happened to him, and in so little time, that he wondered if anything was real. Bumping into a large woman, whose body seemed to consist entirely of hard corners, convinced him that he was not dreaming—that he really was Theodore Whinney, and that the recent interview he had had with the Editor of the *Daily Bugle* was not a product of his imagination, but an actual fact.

He was famous! He was at last on his way to being rich! Men were polite to him; they almost fawned at his approach! He was a Somebody—he, who up till now, had been the merest nonentity, the veriest cipher! Amazing!

It was only natural that he should be elated, he told himself; when, finally, the downtrodden worm turns, it can be pardoned for standing on its rear and giving the on-lookers a resounding raspberry. And, whilst Theodore did not commit himself to this exhibition, his thoughts as he hailed a prowling taxi-cab with a nonchalance that amounted almost to abandon, inevitably centred on what he should do now that Fortune had smiled so conspicuously upon him.

As he gave the driver an address, his mouth hardened and his eyes glinted. He must be adamant, he told himself. He was so resolved to be adamant that, rapping on the glass which separated him from the driver, he urged the latter to make greater speed. The charioteer mumbled in his unshaven chin: "Nasty-lookin' little runt; shouldn't be surprised if he wasn't goin' to commit a murder."

It was an astounding scene, the like of which the walls of the small flat in Parliament Hill Gardens had assuredly never looked upon before. There was Theodore Whinney addressing his womenfolk, whom he had peremptorily called together, and allowing no interruptions.

"I have made up my mind, and nothing either of you may say will make me change it," he said, the words rolling out like so many separate thunderclaps. "In short, I am adamant. This place," waving a hand round the room, "will be too confined for me in the future; I must have space—I—er—have expanded; expanded, if I may say so, in a remarkable manner, and I must have corresponding accommodation."

"What do you intend to do?" gasped his mother.

He grasped the nettle.

"I intend to live alone in the future."

"To . . . live alone?"

If he had announced that he proposed taking up his future abode on a small island in the South Seas, his words could not have been received with greater consternation.

It was perhaps only natural that the first thoughts of the three listeners should be of self-preservation.

"What is to become of *us*, Theodore?" cried Mrs. Whinney.

"You must think of *us*," declared Agatha.

"Yes, *indeed!*" supported Ida.

Theodore threw back his head.

"I am not entirely selfish," he replied; "what I have decided is as much for your good as my own; naturally I shall continue to support you all; and now that my financial prospects are so much improved, I shall be able to allot you a better allowance."

The all-important question of their meal-tickets being thus satisfactorily settled, the three female Whinneys proceeded to attack the proposal from every other angle

with great animation. The dark thought had occurred to all of them that Theodore, that hitherto simple soul, had had an ulterior motive in suggesting—indeed, insisting—he should set up a separate establishment. Had some designing woman got hold of him? Was that the reason behind his outrageous suggestion? If so, then it must be squashed forthwith.

But to all counter-suggestions, which were laced by appeals, peppered by reproaches and laden with tears, he remained deaf and importunate. He had made up his mind, he said, and no good purpose would be gained by further argument.

In a word, he remained adamant. Even the fact that Mrs. Whinney, in having the last word, declared that he must have a stone for a heart, left him unmoved.

The announcement printed in the *Daily Bugle* that this go-ahead newspaper had secured the services of the man they had decided to turn into the most popular broadcaster of the day, was not received any too well by either Horace Wimbush or by Sir Harry Titmarsh, C.B.E. Both felt, in their different ways, that Whinney had been rather too precipitate. Wimbush, for his part, foresaw trouble in Fleet Street; the other organs of the Popular Press, annoyed at being outwitted by their rival sheet, would now turn their most sarcastic writers on to the task of pouring ridicule on the "Here Are the Answers" feature.

Whinney himself, when questioned on the point, showed a marked independence.

"There was nothing in my contract with you," he told Wimbush, "from preventing me writing for a newspaper; and as the offer made me by the *Daily Bugle* was such a good one, I naturally accepted it. The trouble with me is that up till now I have not appreciated my real worth."

With that the organizer of the "Here Are the Answers"

feature had to be content, and his calm was later comparatively restored when, in a short subsequent interview with Sir Harry Titmarsh, C.B.E., the Wart-hog pointed out that the publicity Whinney would receive from the *Daily Bugle* would be very valuable for the Northern Radio Company.

"I daresay it will work out all right," replied Wimbush, thinking wishfully.

CHAPTER X

JULIETTE BRIG

THERE is one thing about the modern Popular Press: when it sets out on a job, it leaves not even the smallest pebble unturned. So it was with the *Daily Bugle*—Theodore Whinney Campaign. The ex-Professor of Grantley University was "plugged" with the tireless regularity of the latest song-hit; indeed, the better part of the Entertainments Page of the *Bugle* was given up to the exploitation of the latest recruit to the editorial staff, for a whole week.

After this preliminary fanfare of trumpets, Whinney was set to work. His task was to answer any question (in print) which the readers of the *Bugle* cared to send in to him.

The response to this invitation was so overwhelming that from a first count of 35,000, the daily mail addressed to "The Man Who Knows Everything" rapidly mounted to nearly a quarter of a million. As no living person could reasonably be expected even to read such a mammoth correspondence within the twenty-four hours, let alone reply to it, the editorial conference, which Whinney was allowed to attend, decided that only twelve questions each day should be answered by the office phenomenon, and

that selections should be made by a special staff of sorters. Asked if that suited his convenience, Whinney, whose ego showed an astonishing upward tendency these days, replied briefly: "Certainly." He said the word with a lilt; but he little knew what fresh tumult this new development was to cause.

If this were a play, instead of a story, it would be the writer's duty at this point to insert the words:

Enter Juliette Brig

For, although she has been lurking unseen and unmentioned behind the scenes until now, Juliette Brig is a very important character indeed: she is the female, in fact, destined by a mischievous Fate to bring fresh tumult into the already tumult-laden breast of Theodore Whinney.

Juliette Brig belonged to the stepper-class. That is to say, she was young—twenty-five—was distinctly glamorous; was markedly curvaceous; possessed reasonably good manners (for the present day); was chockful of confidence; was not over-scrupulous; walked well, dressed well, talked well, and had a philosophy which was simple but very definite. This could be adequately summed up in the words: "The world owes me a good time, and I am going to see I get it."

Juliette had tried many things once, but had found great difficulty in settling her mind to any of them. She had been mannequin in a Dover Street *salon*; a saleswoman in a much less dignified shop; she had done a little (a very little) film work as an "extra"; she had acted as chauffeuse for an elderly statesman with a *penchant* for putting curvaceous brunettes into tight-fitting uniforms—and there had been other occupations not to be set down here. In short, Juliette might well be described as a modern soldieress of

fortune, except that, in keeping with the old saw, she hadn't collected much moss to date; and, as her main purpose in life was to gather as much moss as was possible, and within the quickest possible time, the poor girl, at the moment she was due to make her fresh entry into this chronicle, was dissatisfied with life.

Very dissatisfied, as a matter of fact, because she had been out of regular collar for some time now, and all the signs and portents were that it looked like being a hard winter. Something had to be done, the little girl told herself, and done without any appreciable loss of time. It was a crying shame, she averred, as she stood looking at herself in the cracked mirror in the one-roomed flatlet to which she had been reduced, in a back street in the less favourable part of Bayswater, that a girl of her style should be wondering where her next square meal was coming from.

Having put on her frock again—for Juliette Brig was the type who preferred to survey herself whilst in a state of semi-undress—Juliette picked up that morning's copy of the *Daily Bugle* and scanned the front page. Apart from a couple of serious earthquakes in Turkey, revolutions in two of the smaller South American republics, a race riot in that perpetual home of race-riots, Detroit, the assassination of the latest Bulgarian Prime Minister, a report (unconfirmed) that the greater part of Germany was going nudist owing to the shortage of clothes—an aftermath of the war which a now happily-deceased Austrian paper-hanger had lost for them so disastrously—there did not seem a thing worth reading, and, after scanning the headlines, Juliette yawned, before turning to the inside page which printed the Situations Vacant advertisements. Occasionally in the past she had been successful in obtaining work of one kind or another through replying to a Box Office No. in the *Bugle*, and she was hoping almost against hope that her eye would catch something attractive that morning.

It did. Under the heading:

INTERESTING WORK

she read the following:

Work of an extremely interesting character is waiting for suitable applicants in the office of the *Daily Bugle*, Fleet Street, E.C.4.

Candidates must be well-educated, be responsible-minded and trustworthy. The positions available will be well-paid.

Apply in person, after 12 noon, to Mr. B. A. Charters.

Although Juliette in her most optimistic moments could not truthfully have described herself as being either well-educated, trustworthy or responsible-minded, this seemed the answer to prayer, and, without more ado, she donned her best, and set out to do business (if possible) with the unknown Mr. Charters.

The latter, she discovered, was entirely surrounded—practically submerged, in fact—by well-educated, responsible-minded and trustworthy men and women, the latter predominating, and it was only by the exercise of tooth-and-claw methods, which she had proved successful in past encounters of a similar description that she was able to get herself into the smallish room at all.

By this time, Mr. Charters, hating all mankind, more especially the specimens who were using up the entirely inadequate air-supply, and already an hour late for his much-needed lunch, presented a sorry, not to say pitiable, spectacle.

“All the places are filled!” he barked.

But Juliette was used to that one.

“By entirely useless people, I am sure,” she said, accompanying the words with a smile she had practised before a mirror many moons before. “Mr. Charters,” she went on, giving him all she had, which was considerable, “do please

be reasonable. Here have I refused to take three other jobs this morning because I was convinced that this work which your paper wants done was absolutely made for me—and now you snap and tell me I have wasted my time. It's too bad!"

Although, at the moment, one might not have thought it, Bertram A. Charters was only human. What was more, he had an eye (in his more leisured moments) for a curvaceous wench, who was otherwise pleasing—and he simply hated to see a pretty girl cry. (By this time, it should be added, Juliette was practically sobbing her eyes out.)

"Oh, hell!" he muttered, and then aloud: "What is your name . . . please?"

Feeling that the victory was already half-won, the latest panter after toil replied through her tears: "Juliette Brig."

Now, whether it was that the name "Juliette" conjured up in Bertram A. Charters's mind some insane idea that his parents should have christened him "Romeo," cannot be reliably stated, but the fact remains that, after giving his latest caller a second look-over, the bestower of bounty put the cap on his fountain-pen, pushed back his chair, and said: "Come out and have some lunch with me; we can talk while we eat."

Juliette dried her tears immediately; there was a time for everything, and she knew that a man hated to take out to lunch a girl who was slopping all over the place.

Need it be said that Juliette brought home the bacon? Putting on an act which made Bertram twice try to swallow his fork instead of roast mutton, she had him lying helpless on the ropes before the sweets stage; whilst by the time they had returned to the office, he was bound and gagged.

Blinking like an owl (boy, oh, boy! what curves!) Charters did his best to explain the precise duties she—in common with the rest of the successful candidates—would

be expected to do. A mammoth pile of letters descended on the *Daily Bugle* office every day, he said, and she, with her colleagues, would be required to sort these, to throw away the frivolous, the ribald, the nonsensical and the generally worthless, and to hold over for consideration by the Editor and his staff those few in number which were later to be placed before the marvellous Professor Theodore Whinney ("What a man, Miss Brig! *What* a man!!") for his gigantic brain to deal with.

"It should be really very interesting work, Miss Brig."

"I'm sure it will be," she said. It was just as well for Bertram A. Charters's peace of mind that he did not know how interesting his listener intended it to be.

"Tell me about Professor Whinney!" she urged.

It was then that Bertram first began to suffer pangs. Hitherto—although he hadn't had sufficient pluck to ask her—he had assumed the girl he had favoured so signally was naturally well-educated, responsible-minded and trustworthy. It now came as something of a shock to find that she was sufficiently frivolous to be curious about any male but himself.

Bertram A. resolved to stop this foolishness right away.

"Professor Whinney is a recluse," he said, by way of a start.

"What is a 'recluse'?" was the rejoinder.

Naturally, Charters was staggered. To imagine a successful candidate for a post for which the three essential qualities were good education, responsible-mindedness and trustworthiness, being so ignorant as not to know the meaning of the word "recluse" was a shock.

"Do you mean to tell me, Miss Brig, that you don't know what a recluse is?" he enquired, stormily.

Realizing she had made a mistake, Juliette quickly back-pedalled.

"Of course I do, stupid!" she countered.

"Well, what *does* it mean?"

"It means a man who only eats vegetables."

At that, Bertram A. decided he must do his duty. And his duty, as he saw it, was to go back on his pledge, and tell this girl that her standard of intelligence was obviously so low that he could not possibly recommend her for the post. Then, even whilst he was framing the words of renunciation, Juliette Brig laughed.

"That's to pay you back for asking me silly questions," she said, brightly.

Bertram, being somewhat on the simple side, having concentrated on his work for most of his life, and giving little heed to whoopee of any description, accepted this at its face value; he really did think that the girl had been pulling his leg.

Juliette watched his face intently; shrewd-witted, she knew she had made a mistake which might blast her future prospects, and endeavoured to carry off her error by a counter-attack.

She sighed with relief when she saw the look of tension fade from the homely Cricklewood features of her benefactor; and, like a good tactician, she made no further attempt to draw him on the subject of Professor Whinney. That topic, she sensed, was taboo.

The poor fish was actually jealous!

CHAPTER XI

THE INFERNAL FEMININE

IT was about a week after the *Daily Bugle* had begun to print its own version of "Here Are the Answers," that Juliette Brig was able to put her plan of campaign into practice.

Her object from the beginning had been to make the personal acquaintance of a man everybody was now talking about, and to start work on him. What she hoped exactly to achieve she did not precisely know, but on general principles the idea seemed sound. For here was a man who had achieved a tremendous amount of Fame, with—and this was the 'important part from her point of view—a corresponding amount of money. As already indicated, Juliette was acutely interested in the subject of money, and was not too particular how it was accrued. She was more than usually hard-up at the moment; this fellow with the ridiculous name earned wads of it—*ergo*, the situation undoubtedly called for the famous Juliette Brig touch.

The main difficulty up till now had been gaining contact; Professor Whinney was guarded, during the short time he spent in the *Daily Bugle* office each day, as zealously as though he were the Crown Jewels, and so far, the many schemes she had planned for gaining access to the room at the end of the editorial corridor had been frustrated.

"Why should *you* take the selected questions along to the Professor?" Enid Starke, the gaunt-featured ex-school-mistress, who had been placed in charge of the Selection Squad, had acidly enquired only the day before.

Juliette had had to fight her flaming temper; it would be fatal, she knew, to show her hand too clearly. Nothing would have pleased her quite so much—not even meeting Professor Theodore Whinney face to face—as to tell this poisonous female exactly what she thought of her; but that must wait: she had set her course, and she would not allow anything or anyone to divert her from it.

"It is only a question of curiosity, Miss Starke," she replied; "naturally, I should like to see this man with his wonderful brain."

"What on earth do *you* know about brain, Miss Brig?" came the devastating retort; "and whilst we are on the

subject, I am sorry to say that your work is giving me less satisfaction every day. I intended to speak to you about it at the first opportunity, and this seems as good a chance as any."

The little gasp which the criticised one gave was most artistically done; so was the feigned expression of humility.

"I am sorry, Miss Starke, I will try to do better—really, I will."

"I hope so, indeed; well, for the moment, I will say nothing more about it."

"Oh, thank you, Miss Starke; I am very grateful to you."

Juliette showed her gratitude by putting out her tongue directly her superior's back was turned, and by registering a fresh vow that when the opportunity came, she would have her complete revenge.

And now she was having it—or part of it, anyway. For on the very next day word came through that the Chief of the Special Department created to deal with the ever-mounting mail was ill. "I do hope it's nothing trivial," Juliette said to the girl at the next desk.

"Oh, Miss Brig, how *can* you say such a thing? I think Miss Starke's *ever* so nice."

"It was only my joke," replied Juliette, back-pedalling; really, the people she had to mix with these days!—it was too appalling!

With the Starke out of the way, things were much easier, and by eleven o'clock, Juliette was able to slip away and to walk unobserved along the corridor, at the end of which was her objective. Waiting until she saw the man she knew to be the Assistant Editor of the *Daily Bugle* leave the room, she assumed the most effective of all her poses, that of the hero-worshipping, rapturous seeker after excitement (innocent variety), and knocked on the door behind which she

knew (unless he had absented himself temporarily for the purpose of washing his hands) Professor Whinney must be lurking.

There was no reply, and she knocked again—louder this time.

Now there was a response. "Come in!" boomed a voice that might have belonged to a human bull of Bashan.

Juliette lost no time. Some fool might come along at any moment to interrupt. Opening the door, she stepped into the room.

Theodore Whinney stared at this apparition. Unaccustomed to freedom—he had moved into a small service-flat only that morning—the novelty of being his own master had had an intoxicating effect. To have thrown off the trammels of the female incubi who had stifled him for so long—this was Life, *real* Life! In celebration of the event, he had purchased a carnation from a flower-woman at Piccadilly Circus (appropriately enough beneath Eros himself), and with this pinned in his buttonhole had walked jauntily to do his daily stint in Fleet Street. Spring was not only in the air (this was still only the first week in May, remember), but in his blood.

Theodore, being the sap he was, did not know quite what had happened to him, beyond the fact that he was free of the restraining influences of his mother and sisters that had kept him hencooped for so long; he was not aware that certain physiological processes were being released within him, and that there would shortly be the devil to pay in consequence; he was not aware that, in casting off one set of bonds, he was about to be tied up by another and more deadly variety.

All this was mercifully hidden from him, as, looking up, he noticed a very striking-looking girl, a complete stranger, looking at him in what he could only decide was an awe-struck manner. Even though he was now getting used to

homage, the expression on this girl's face was so compelling that he began to feel nervous.

"Yes-es?" he stammered. It was the rabbit and the snake all over again.

Juliette Brig struck whilst the iron was hot.

"Oh, Professor," she cooed; "you *are* Professor Whinney?"

"Yes, I'm Professor Whinney," he replied. Theodore's voice was unsteady, and for a very good reason. Living the severely celibate, not to say monastic, existence he had done up till now, he had never stopped to speculate on the precise purpose of the curves which even he had noticed certain women's bodies possessed: if they served any purpose at all, he had assumed that Nature had put them there in order to fill out certain gaps in women's clothes.

Now he knew differently; as this girl moved—or, rather, undulated—towards him, he realized that on this one subject at least his information had been lamentably deficient: whether it was due to the feeling of Spring, the sense of newly-won freedom, or the carnation in his buttonhole, something had changed him, and changed him fundamentally: for the first time in his life he found himself interested in feminine curves, which, as has been said, he had previously assumed served merely a utilitarian purpose. He went all hot at the thought.

The girl who had caused such havoc in his mind came right up to the desk at which he was sitting.

"Oh, Professor," she said, using the same cooing note, "I know it's a tremendous favour to ask, but would you be kind enough to give me your autograph? I've bought a new book, and I want yours to be the very first name in it. I should be terribly grateful . . . and honoured." Very nicely done!

Well, what would you have done, chums? Put yourself for a moment in Theodore's place. Here was a man who,

at the late age of thirty-five, had just awakened to one of the more elementary facts of Life—namely, that a woman's curves had a romantic appeal—and now he was being asked a favour by the possessor of the most rapturous mouldings he had ever seen. He did not pose as an authority on the subject, of course, but at the same time he now knew what was what, dash it! At least, he thought he did.

Somehow, he found his voice. It appeared to come from his boots, and it had a strange, gurgling sound, but he managed to reply, which was the main thing.

"Certainly I'll sign your book, Miss——"

"Brig. Juliette Brig." Eyes, teeth, lips, curves, all played their part.

Theodore went down before that smile like a stricken ox; he never had a chance. He was not able to see that the carnation rustled its petals in a vain attempt to warn him: he had no eyes for carnations at that moment; all his visual faculties were concentrated on the wonderful creature which had been sent—or so it seemed—by Providence to light him on the dark way through Life. Wooie!

"Juliette?" he said, his mouth very dry.

"Juliette—with two 't's, and a final 'e'."

"Charming!"

Theodore might have been surprised at any other time in using the word, because it was one of the least familiar in his vast vocabulary, but he did use it now; indeed, it seemed the only word to use in the circumstances.

"Oh, Professor—how very sweet of you!" Once again, the full Brig batteries were turned on him.

Theodore put out a hand. Or, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that his right hand moved of its own volition. Its owner was prompted by an urgent desire to touch this creature from another world. If asked, he would probably have said that he wished to make sure that she was real.

Juliette watched that hovering hand with the greatest

interest. She was used to hovering hands; in the whole of London there was possibly not a greater authority on hovering hands than Juliette Brig.

But hovering hands carried their own danger—especially if they hovered before the appointed time.

So she retreated a pace and produced the brand-new autograph-book.

Theodore was so bemused that he gaped at the offering.

"What's this?" he asked.

"Oh, Professor, it's my autograph-book; the one I was telling you about; the one I want you to sign."

"Oh!"

The hand which had been hovering was now withdrawn; it went to the tray and picked up a pen.

"Could you put something else besides just your signature, Professor?" enquired a seductive voice at his elbow.

Theodore turned to look at her. All the curves she owned seemed to unite at that moment to tempt him.

"What would you like me to write . . . er . . . Juliette?" he bellowed.

"Oh, you darling!" she cried. "No, I didn't mean that—I didn't really! It was very wrong of me; I can't think what made me do it—forgive me, Professor."

Theodore swallowed the equivalent of several Adam's apples.

"There is nothing to forgive—I mean from my point of view," he choked; and, clutching the pen tightly, he scrawled:

"MAY ALL YOUR WISHES COME TRUE,

THEODORE WHINNEY, 6th May."

Then, blotting the page carefully, he closed the book, and handed it back to her.

Juliette accepted it with what she hoped would sound like an ecstatic sigh.

"How good you are, Professor!" she said, softly; and then—hell and damnation!—the door opened.

It was the Assistant Editor of the *Daily Bugle* again, she noticed. The cad!

"Don't go, Miss Brig; there are one or two things I still want to discuss with you."

Could this be Professor Theodore Whitney speaking? It could, and it was. From some unexpected source, Theodore had found the resolution to master the present awkward situation. He sensed that Arthubert, the Assistant Editor—a naturally suspicious character and a man he had not liked from the beginning—would be thinking just the sort of thing a fellow of his type would be apt to think, and he determined to assert himself. Like the memory of a melody so lilting as to be intoxicating, the three words this girl had said so spontaneously returned to him. "Oh, you darling!" His heart had turned to water at the time, but now it had hardened—not against this wonderful girl, of course, but against the meddlesome interrupter. Couldn't he have a moment to himself? Was he bound, body and soul, to this wretched newspaper just because they paid him a salary? Was he never to be free of the prying eyes of this pestiferous Arthubert?

"What is it now?" he demanded of the latter, and his tone was both loud and peremptory.

Claud Arthubert stopped in his tracks. To see a girl—and such a girl!—bending over the scholarly addition to the editorial staff had been surprising enough, but to be addressed in this arbitrary manner fairly put the lid on it.

"I just wanted to . . ."

He was not allowed to finish.

"Another time! Another time!" said Professor Whitney

decisively, and waved his hand—the same hand which had so recently been hovering—in dismissal.

Even Juliette Brig was astounded, but her astonishment did not prevent her from snapping at this fresh chance.

“Oh, Professor!” she exclaimed when the door had closed behind the Assistant Editor, “how masterful you are!”

Theodore responded to the unwonted praise like a peach suddenly kissed by the sun; he did more than merely respond: he glowed.

“I . . . I . . .” And there he stopped; he, a very lord of language, was stuck for words.

Juliette supplied them.

“I think you are wonderful—really I do!”

Something snapped inside Theodore’s brain; perhaps it was due to the sudden leaping into life of various glands which had hitherto remained dormant—but what does the cause matter?—the effect is the important thing.

His right hand shot out. This time it did not do any paltry hovering: it—and the arm to which it was attached—closed round the speaker’s waist—and hung on.

Even Juliette Brig was startled. She thought she knew men and what they were capable of, but she had not expected anything like this—not yet, at all events.

But she was a willing lass, and not one to let any opportunity slip.

“Oh, Professor!” she cried once more—and moved nearer to the desk.

Hubert Tring was incredulous.

“The fellow must have been drinking,” he said, falling back on the first excuse he could think of.

“At eleven o’clock in the morning?” returned the sardonic Arthubert; “I tell you what it is: this Professor bloke is like all the rest; directly they put their hands on any

sizable money, they develop woman-trouble. I've seen it happen too many times not to recognize the symptoms."

"But, Claud . . . *Whinney!*" The Editor of the *Daily Bugle* felt he had to stick to his guns.

"I know, I know . . . but even Professors have their moments. Anyway, this fellow has: he was going places, I tell you, with this stepper. He was all lit up when I went into the room—and he practically ordered me out. What do you think of that?"

Tring, feeling his responsibility (how could *Whinney* concentrate on answering the twelve selected questions for the next day's paper if his mind was on something else?), daren't put his thoughts into words.

Instead, he side-tracked.

"Who is the girl?" he demanded.

"I've been making enquiries; she's in the Questions Department and is a dud."

"Then sack her."

Arthubert was all for drastic action—this business had to be tackled resolutely—but . . .

"What about *Whinney?*" he queried.

"Well, what about him?"

"If he's gone crackers on this slick piece, won't he kick up rough?"

Tring brushed the objection aside.

"You leave *Whinney* to me," he said—and left the room.

The latest recruit to the editorial staff of the *Daily Bugle* was angry. Hubert Tring had expected many things, but he had not expected this. Rushing into *Whinney's* room, prepared to do battle, he found his thunder stolen right from under his nose.

Before he could say a word himself, the Professor had assailed him.

"I wish to make it quite clear, Mr. Tring, that I regard

this room as my exclusive property," he declared; "and being my exclusive property, I strongly object to people rushing in and out of it, as though it were a fair-ground. How you expect me to concentrate with all this unseemly traffic going on, I can't imagine. Anyway, it must stop—and stop immediately. Otherwise, I am afraid I shall be compelled to hand you my resignation."

"But . . ."

"There are no 'buts' about it, Mr. Tring. I consented to work in this office, it is true, but I naturally concluded that I should have proper privacy."

"But . . ."

The Professor went from strength to strength; the man who only a few days before had been almost afraid to exchange the pleasantries of words with a taxi-driver, was now standing up to the person who had contracted to pay him £50 a week, and the Editor of an important London newspaper at that, and hitting out to left and right as though he didn't care twopence about the consequences!

"I do wish you wouldn't keep on interrupting me by saying that stupid word 'but,' Mr. Tring," he continued. "The word 'but' has always been one of my greatest verbal detestations, symbolising, as it does, lamentable weakness. You will oblige me by not saying it again—at least, not in my presence. That is all." And with a wave of his hand that Mussolini, before the moths had got at him, might have made, he intimated that the interview could be considered as over.

Tring, biting his lip, turned away. If the speaker had been any other member of the staff, he would probably have told him to go to the Cashier and get his money; but, although the realization was bitter, he knew he could not do this with Professor Theodore Whinney. For The Man Who Knew Everything had to be kept sweet—even to the extent, it seemed, of permitting him to do his cuddling on

the office premises. He would liked to have punched the fool's head, but he daren't risk it: the aftermath following the *Bugle's* latest star turn throwing his hand in before he had served the first week of his year's contract would have been disastrous: Lord Blazer would almost certainly break several blood-vessels, and the direct blame would fall on him.

He had started to walk towards the door when the Frankenstein's monster he had created spoke again.

"I have not heard you express your regret yet, Mr. Tring."

The Editor of the *Daily Bugle* fought his temper until he was afraid he might have a stroke.

Then he achieved a triumph of which any older statesman might well have been proud.

"As a matter of fact, Professor, the real reason I came to see you was to apologize for the behaviour of Mr. Arthubert just now."

"Then the matter can be considered concluded," was the reply. A second wave of the hand—Cromwellian this time—cut short any further *pourparlers*.

Once outside, Tring rushed towards the Selections Department where he feared his colleague had already done his dirty work. Nor was he disappointed: before he could reach the lower floor, he met his Assistant Editor on the stairs.

"I've sacked her!" announced Arthubert, licking his lips at the thought.

Tring clutched his head as though he were fearful it would leave his body.

"Oh, my God!" he groaned, "I was afraid of it!"

Arthubert looked at him as though he had doubts about his sanity.

"Well, it was what we agreed on, wasn't it?" he demanded belligerently. It had long been a grievance of Claud Arthubert that he should have to pay subservience to a man

he secretly considered to be definitely his inferior in every branch of newspaper work. "Did you or did you not tell me to sack that bitch?" he went on.

Tring tried to grapple with both horns of the dilemma.

"I did, yes," he replied.

"Then why get so hot and bothered?"

"Because, you fool!" burst from the lips of the tortured Editor, "Whinney has threatened to hand in his resignation."

"Why?"

"Because you went into his room when he was cuddling a girl."

"The girl I've just sacked?"

Tring nodded, the powers of speech having temporarily failed him.

Arthubert paled. But he wasn't going to show his dismay; not likely.

"Well, let the fool resign; it was a crazy idea to bring him here, anyway."

Tring pushed his head forward; he looked like an angry hen asking to have its neck severed by the nearest hatchet.

"Do you happen to remember that it was *my* idea Whinney should join the staff?"

If he wanted it, the other told himself, he could have it.

"I'm perfectly well aware of that," he replied, making his voice sound even more offensive.

"Then damn and blast your eyes!" shrieked Hubert Tring, long since past the limit of his endurance. And lunging out with his left fist, he endeavoured to knock his assistant down the stairs.

But the scheme did not work. Arthubert swerved in time to avoid the blow, which he had seen coming, and reaching down, grabbed his superior by the ankles. The next moment the sound of a perfectly fiendish fracas could be heard all over the building.

In the midst of the struggle, a door on the next floor

opened. A man walked rapidly to the railing and looked down.

"Stop that infernal row at once!" he said in a voice that rose above the tumult like a hurricane above a zephyr.

It was Professor Theodore Whinney asserting his authority.

CHAPTER XII

THERMOMETER TESTS

ASSERTING one's authority—especially in the early stages—brings its own penalties. Theodore discovered that. Now that he was back in the service-flat in St. James's, he found himself suffering from something like a hangover. He had been imbibing so freely of the heady draughts of excitement that he felt he wanted to crawl into a hole and be left entirely alone.

He had much to ponder over, and, his nature being what it was, he could not help pondering. To begin with, he recalled with a hot, burning sensation of shame that, for the first time in his life, he had kissed a woman with passion. It was no good trying to deceive himself: the kiss he had planted on the ripe lips of Juliette Brig had been anything but platonic. It had been wanton, and, therefore, sinful.

True, he had had excuses: the girl had been willing, it seemed; at least, she had not protested. And her physical presence, coupled with the homage she insisted upon paying him, had been very stimulating. But where would it lead? That was the question which both tantalized and bothered him. One couldn't behave in that way with a girl—a complete stranger, too—without paying some sort of price. There must be an aftermath.

The hot, burning sensation which he found so embar-

raising increased in strength. He felt himself shivering, and wondered if he had a temperature. Anxious to be on the safe side—with all the work he had on hand, he simply dared not be ill—he went to the small medicine-chest which he had brought with the rest of his things from the flat in Parliament Hill Gardens, took out a thermometer and stuck it into his mouth. When the allotted time had passed, he looked at the mercury, nervously.

Normal—a trifle below normal, to be strictly accurate. That was strange, and a little disappointing. If he had had a temperature, he could have gone straight to bed with a couple of aspirins and a hot bottle, and waited until the fever had burned itself out. The work would have had to be put aside; the anxiety he had felt on this score only a few minutes before was swept aside by this feeling of annoyance.

He still felt very hot, and he wondered if there could be anything wrong with the thermometer. For a moment he almost wished that his mother or one of his two sisters were there, but in their absence—he dismissed this temporary weakness as being unworthy—he had to find someone else on whom to experiment. The boy who ran messages for the tenants might do—he'd have to do.

Ring the bell, he told the servant to send Charles to him. "Charles is that boy's name, isn't it?" he added.

The manservant, who had his own ideas as to the type of person who should live in Barnabas House, and who had been doubtful about the speaker from the start, looked down his nose. Yes, he admitted with evident reluctance, Charles was the name of the boy in question.

"Then tell him I want to see him," replied Theodore, impatiently.

Shrugging his shoulders, as though to intimate that he personally refused to take any responsibility, the man closed the door behind him.

Now that he saw him at such close quarters, Theodore wondered if he had not made a mistake in his choice of subject: this carrotty-headed youngster grinned at him impishly, and gave a general impression that, if Sin was the particular subject to be discussed, then Theodore could not have called in a better authority.

Before Whinney could put his project into words, Charles had weighed in with an observation of his own.

"Say," he observed in a strong American accent that he must have borrowed from a recent Hollywood film, "are you the guy that knows everything?"

Theodore stiffened. This was a very bad beginning to what he proposed should be a probing scientific test.

"I did not ask you to come up here in order that you might put impertinent questions," he observed, severely.

Charles was unperturbed by the rebuke.

"Gee!" he chuckled, hoarsely; "you're the guy all right, all right; you use such long words."

"Now listen to me, my boy," said Whinney, striving to check this frivolous impertinence; "I want to make a small experiment on you."

The boy's eyes widened.

"I don't get you, guv'nor," he replied.

Theodore produced the thermometer.

"Do you know what this is?" he asked.

"Yes. It's somethin' you stick in your mouth."

"Exactly." He felt he was making some progress. "Now if you will allow me to put this in your mouth, and if you promise to let it stay there for the space of three minutes, I'll give you a shilling."

"A shillin'!" The offer was rejected with scorn.

Theodore ground his dentures.

"Half-a-crown, then."

"Money down?"

"Money down."

"And no funny business?"

"I don't know what you mean, Charles, by 'funny business.' This is an important experiment. I feel ill, but this thermometer, which I have never known to be unreliable before, says my temperature is normal. I want to put it to another test."

"But why pick on me? Why couldn't you have roped in old Beeswax?"

"I don't know who you mean by 'Beeswax'."

Charles, twisting his diminutive body, became convulsed by silent but extravagant laughter.

"And I thought you was the bloke wot knew everything—your name is Whinney, isn't it?"

Theodore thought it best to humour him.

"My name is Whinney, certainly."

"Prof. Whinney?"

"Prof.—Professor Whinney."

"And you're the one who talks 'is blinkin' 'ead off on the Wireless?"

"I broadcast in the 'Here Are the Answers' programme, if that is what you are trying to convey."

"And you also write in the *Daily Bugle*?"

"I write in the *Daily Bugle*, yes."

"Geel!" Charles's attitude had changed; the boy became thoughtful.

"It's wonderful 'ow some blokes can get away with it," he reflected, as though resentful of Fate's inconsistent dispensations.

"An' you such a funny-lookin' guy, too," he added, still pondering deeply.

Theodore's temper got the better of him.

"Do you realize I could get you dismissed for such impudence?" he said.

The boy cocked a knowing eye at him.

"That's another thing you *don't* know, Mister," he

returned confidently; "why, old Beeswax—that's the manager of this joint—wouldn't dare to give me the fare-you-well! 'Cause why? 'Cause all the tenants wouldn't know wot to do if I left 'ere, see? They rely on me. Gee! I could tell you some things about wot I do for 'em: takin' flowers and notes round to their girl friends, seein' who's who and wot's wot—and a hundred other things. No, siree, Barnabas 'Ouse couldn't get along without little old Charles, an' don't you get thinkin' it could."

The odd thing was that Theodore felt this astonishing boy was speaking the plain and literal truth; it was a strange reflection on our modern civilization that the one indispensable individual in that great colony of human beings, which he had selected as his habitat, should be the lowliest of them all.

Still, the fact had to be faced, and he faced it.

"I am sorry, Charles," he said; "I shouldn't have made that statement."

Charles showed his magnanimous spirit by nodding as a token that he agreed.

"You'll get to know better as time goes on," he replied; "you're young 'ere yet. And now," as though reminding himself that greater events were being held in abeyance, "wot abaht that half-a-dollar, guv'nor?"

Professor Whinney, recalled to his duty, produced half-a-crown.

"You shall have this, Charles, directly I have ascertained what your temperature is," he stated.

Charles shook his head sorrowfully; he seemed to be lamenting over the insensate follies of his fellow humans.

"Well, I can't 'elp it if you're crackers," he then remarked. "Where's that there—where's the thing you do it with?"

"Open your mouth," ordered Whinney, and when the boy had obeyed, he thrust the thermometer between the lad's lips.

"Now close your mouth, but don't bite on it."

"Well, guv'nor, am I goin' to croak?" enquired this amazing patient.

"No, Charles, I don't think so."

"I'm all right then, am I?"

"Your temperature is normal."

"O.K. Now where's the 'alf-a-dollar?"

Expectorating on it, presumably for luck, Charles put the coin safely away in his trousers-pocket.

"I'll take the girl-friend out to-night," he announced.

Theodore, feeling he was venturing into what to him had formerly been entirely virgin country, asked a preliminary question.

"How old are you, Charles?"

"Fifteen. Why?"

"Fifteen—and do you mean to tell me you already go out with girls?"

The Barnabas House Indispensable leered at his questioner.

"Wot do *you* think?" he replied.

"I don't know what to think; I can only say I'm amazed that a lad of your age should be thinking of seeking female society."

Charles looked at him incredulously.

"Well, wot else *is* there to seek?" he rejoined.

Professor Whinney, not knowing what to say, pointed to the door.

"That will be all, Charles, thank you."

"Righteo, guv'nor; if you ever want any little job done in the way of a girl-friend, you've only to let me know."

"I have no girl-friend," said Whinney.

The boy walked up to him and tapped him on the second button of his waistcoat, counting from the top.

"Take it from me, guv'nor, you don't know wot you've

been missin'," he said oracularly; and then, spinning round like a human top, he pursued a grotesque course to the door.

Left alone, Theodore, to whom Life had just given another startling surprise, sat brooding in his chair. The thermometer, to judge from the recent test, was in perfect order: consequently, his own health was good; the fever which had been consuming him was consequently not of the body but of the mind.

But he would have to get rid of it; he must exorcize this malaise which was tormenting him, and causing fretfulness and loss of concentration. The questions were (1) what had caused it? and (2) how could it be eradicated? The circumscribed nature of his life up to date had not brought the philosophic reflection to Theodore that Life was always twopence to pay; but he was to learn the bitter truth, and in overflowing measure, before very long.

He was roused out of his brooding by a spirited knock. It sounded like the hammering of Fate; but when he reached the door, he saw standing on the threshold the boy he had recently dismissed with the half-a-crown guerdon. Charles was grinning with the abandon of a mischievously-minded sprite.

"Lady to see you, guv'nor," he announced, and leered. Theodore gasped.

"A lady? Here?"

Cupid's patrol nodded vigorously.

"She's comin' up in the lift now," he went on, and leered again.

That second leer was eloquent. It said as plainly as any words: "So you 'aven't got a girl-friend, eh? Well, wot's this prize-sample callin' on you, eh?"

Before Whinney had time to grasp fully the situation, the lift had come to a stop opposite the door of the flat; the gates opened, and a girl erupted tempestuously.

It was Juliette Brig, and she obviously had not come to collect a subscription for Foreign Missions.

"Darling!" she cried, rushing at Theodore. (It is only fair to the Professor to add that his first instinct had been to thrust forward his arms in an endeavour to protect himself.)

Theodore immediately became acutely aware of two facts. The first was that the former sensation of being possessed by a consuming fever had noticeably increased, and the second was that the boy, Charles, had a Mephistophelian smile on his freckled face.

Something had to be done—the present situation was too embarrassing to be borne.

But it was Charles who did it. Stepping round to the back of the Professor, he flung the door of the flat open to the widest possible extent, stood in butler-like fashion by the side, and said: "Professor Whinney will see you now, Miss." Then, with a wink at the visitor, he took his departure, his diminutive figure seemingly convulsed by stifled mirth.

Theodore took the hint.

"Hadn't we—I think, perhaps, we had better go inside," he murmured. The perfume which the girl who was still embracing him used, was providing an intoxicating effect; but he had sufficient sense left to be aware that what had roused the boy, Charles, to such an unseemly exhibition of merriment, could not be prolonged, at least not in public.

"Oh, Professor!" cried the girl; "do you think we had better?"

Theodore felt himself shivering. The words, although apparently innocent enough, might have a secret meaning which, in his inexperience, he could not understand.

"We will go inside," he said, the burning fever and the cold shiver alternating like the strokes of a grandfather clock striking the hour. "We can't talk here," he added, throwing a sop to the sense of respectability which he was beginning to think he had lost for ever.

The visitor did not stop to argue; with her arm linked in his, she rushed into the flat, and closed the door quickly behind them.

"Where do you actually live?" she asked, looking as eager as a child promised a treat.

Theodore did not reply at once. Even in his confusion, he considered the looseness of the phrase deplorable. He supposed she meant, which room did he principally use?

"This is the sitting-room," he said, after a pause.

"Then *do* sit in it, darling," urged the caller. Without more ado, she led him to the one inadequate chair with which the room was provided, thrust him into it, and then, with a swirl of her skirts, perched herself on his knees. It was all done so quickly that Theodore would not have had time to protest even if he wanted to.

He didn't know that he did want to protest; he didn't know anything at the moment. His brain had gone on strike; it absolutely refused to function. More important still, perhaps, the ice-cold sensation down his spine had now disappeared; only the burning fever remained. This was the first time a woman had ever sat on Theodore's knee—and thirty-five years is a long time to have to wait for the experience.

"You're trembling! Oh, Professor!" exclaimed the percher; "are you angry with me?"

Somehow he managed to reply.

"I am not angry with you," he said; "perhaps I ought to be angry with you, but I am not angry with you."

The veneer cracked a little; after all, it was under a terrific strain.

"Well, thank God for that," said Juliette Brig; "and after all, I *had* to come. Not that you've said you're glad to see me yet," she went on, poutingly.

Whatever his faults may have been, Theodore was a gentleman. His father may have spent a good deal of time

in the traditional way of stockbrokers by exchanging lewd stories with his fellows, but his own instincts were sound. The very fact that he detested the entire family-tree on his mother's side was proof of that. And, being a gentleman, he felt he had to pay some heed to this present complaint.

"I am very glad to see you—although I was not expecting you to call."

Juliette felt her girdle expand. One more crack like that from this mutt, and she would have to throw her hand in. Was the fellow really human to be able to talk like that?

Whilst she was thus communing, she felt her waist being squeezed. Her question was being answered.

She fell back on her slogan.

"Oh, Professor!"

The pressure on her body slackened.

"I am afraid I forgot myself—just as I forgot myself this morning at the office."

Not so good. The fool seemed to be developing a conscience.

"I forgot myself, too," she said penitently, and slipped off his knees. "I was so thankful to see you that . . . that . . ." Tears began to flow.

The beholder's heart turned itself over. Was he such a brute as to make this girl cry? The evidence went to show that he was.

"My dear Miss Brig . . ." he started.

She turned a tear-ridden face towards him.

"It was 'Juliette' this morning," she moaned.

His heart did another violent somersault. What an unfeeling creature he was!

"It shall be 'Juliette' now," he promised; "that is, if you wish it."

"Of course I wish it," she cried passionately; "do you think I am a girl who can forget as easily as all that? Why are you so changed?"

“‘Changed’?”

“Yes, changed. This morning you were so nice to me; you even kissed me . . . do you remember?”

“I remember; indeed, how could I forget?”

She seized on the last word.

“But you seem to have forgotten all right; this morning you were so kind and sympathetic, so understanding—but when you saw me just now, I might have been a stranger! You were so cold and distant . . . and it nearly broke my heart!” The water-works started up again. “And before you had even heard what I had to say,” she wound up.

Reproaches, like so many arrows, were being plunged into Theodore’s breast.

“Forgive me,” he said, not knowing what else to say; “I will listen to your story, Juliette; indeed, I am anxious to hear it.”

Conquering herself a second time, the visitor swept into her tale. It was a tale of woe, and as he listened, Theodore decided he must be a slightly worse individual than Nero.

“I got the sack from my job this morning,” the girl said, “and although, of course, I don’t blame you, it was entirely due to you.”

“To *me*!”

“To you, Professor! That horrible man, Arthubert, or whatever his name is—you know, the Assistant Editor of the *Bugle*—came down to the Selections Department and called me all the names under the sun.”

“The brute!”

“Yes, he was a brute. And all because you had shown me a little friendliness.”

“This must be put right.”

What induced him to make such a rash assertion, Theodore did not know, but he said it, which was the main thing from the listener’s point of view.

"But how can it be put right?" she demanded; "here I am, out of work, and with no money saved—oh, what can I *do*?"

Although she had reproached him only indirectly, Theodore felt he was wholly to blame; yes, he was responsible: if he had not allowed that side of his nature which he had not been aware even existed before, to gain the upper hand, this poor girl would still have been engaged in her humble capacity of sorting out the myriads of questions which arrived at the *Daily Bugle* office by every post. Indubitably, he was to blame.

"If I can do anything . . ." he proffered.

"Do you mean that?" She had fastened on the words almost before they were out of his mouth.

He had to play up; he couldn't go back on his promise. He had kissed this girl, hadn't he? She had sat on his knees, hadn't she? Very well, then:

"Of course I mean it."

"Oh, Professor, what an angel you are!" she exclaimed; "you won't see me starve, then?"

"Certainly not."

For a moment she considered rushing everything, and telling the poor prune that, after what had happened, the least he could do was to marry her; but reflection warned her that this might frighten him off altogether. So she compromised.

"A busy man like you ought to have a secretary, darling; why not make me your secretary?"

Theodore, to whom the ice-cold sensation down the spine had returned now that she was no longer on his knees, could think of a thousand different reasons against the suggestion, but his conscience and cowardice combined prevented him from giving voice to even one of them.

"Very well; you shall be my secretary," he declared.

Before she could express her gratitude, he had popped

the thermometer which he had taken out of his pocket, into his mouth.

"What on earth are you doing?" she cried.

"Just taking my temperature," he replied.

"Why on earth do you want to take your temperature now?"

"I was beginning to think—that was before you arrived—that I might be ill."

"Why should you think you might be ill?"

"Because I had hot and cold sensations."

She laughed—loudly.

"That means you've fallen in love with me, darling," she said; "I'll tell you what: you take your temperature first, and then you can take mine."

"I was going to suggest that, if you didn't mind. You see, I wasn't sure that this thermometer was working properly."

"Oh, God!" shrieked Juliette Brig, and flung up her arms.

"Both normal," said the visitor a few minutes later. "That means we're both in love with each other. Oh, darling, we're going to be so happy!"

"I hope so," replied Theodore—but the ice-cold sensation had distinctly the better of the burning fever as he spoke.

CHAPTER XIII

BOTHER WITH A BULGAR

MEANWHILE, Ida Whinney, living remote from the world-shaking events in which her brother was playing the stellar rôle, was having a rather bad bout of bother with a Bulgar.

Feeling the need to assert herself, Ida had taken her

courage in both hands and gone round to the nearest branch of the Wurzimeter Language Bureau. She was tired, in any case, of struggling with stray pupils, most of whom seemed to be candidates for the nearest Home for Mental Deficients. At the Wurzimeter Language Bureau—if only she could get an appointment to the staff: that was the important thing, of course—she would have a steady (if small) income, status and personal protection. Her soul asked for personal protection since the never-to-be-forgotten afternoon when a miscreant calling himself an Italian Count pinched a certain part of her anatomy (an old Italian custom, she subsequently learned), whilst murmuring decadent Italian endearments into her ear. After that episode, Ida resolved (*a*) either to give up teaching foreigners or (*b*) to secure a post with the Wurzimeter Bureau.

Her interview with the principal of this concern had been brief, scarcely brotherly, but very much to the point. After shooting unexpected questions at her in five different tongues, the Principal, a short, stout, disillusioned-looking man of fifty-five, with bloodshot eyes and a good deal of dandruff on his coat-collar, who looked more like the leader of a dangerous subversive movement than the head of a reasonably respectable commercial concern, snapped: "Two pounds a week—take it or leave it."

"Two pounds a week!" gasped the applicant. Had she laboured over foreign grammars all these years to be repaid at this paltry rate?

"Take it or leave it; we get hundreds of your class in every week; you happen to look cleaner than the rest," was the terse reply. And the arbiter of her fate turned away, as though, clean or not, her face nauseated him.

Ida made a gulping motion. To the average observer it might have seemed she was suffering from a sudden sickness, but it wasn't that: Ida was swallowing her pride. Two pounds a week was pitiable remuneration, it was true, but it

was better than what she earned on her own, running the risk of being pinched by licentious-minded Latins. Moreover—and this was the most important factor—she, too, was aching to do something to render the name of Whinney famous—well, not perhaps famous in her case, but certainly significant. Yes, she thought, she could go as far as to say that the word “significant” would be justified once she secured this post on the Wurzimeter teaching staff.

“I’ll take it,” she said in a strangled voice.

The Principal of the Wurzimeter Bureau waved an indifferent hand.

“See Miss Pippin,” he said, and picked up the telephone.

Miss Pippin—alas! that so many things in this sadly-disordered world let us down—could scarcely be said to live up to her name. If the terms of horticulture must still be employed, so far from being a pippin, she was a windfall—one of those unhappy apples that, discarded by the tree which has given them birth, become scarred in face and soured in temperament.

Miss Beta Pippin was forty-five; was thin and angular—but was very conscious of her ability to put the fear of Life and Death into each employee of the Wurzimeter Language Bureau. For Beta Pippin was the General Manager of the firm: she not only did the dirty work of the Principal, but brought off quite a few personal devilries of her own.

If there was one duty Beta Pippin liked better than another it was to interview a new applicant for a post; but in Ida Whinney’s case she had the steam temporarily taken out of her because Mr. Ekko Findttt (a naturalized Finn, and looking every inch of it as Ida Whinney could have told her) had got in first and engaged this new assistant over her head.

Next to seeing other women happy, there was nothing Beta Pippin disliked so much as having assistants engaged

over her head. (That was what came of having to go to the dentist's in office hours.)

During the ten minutes that she spent in the presence of Beta Pippin, Ida Whinney suffered every pang that a woman can suffer in keeping her temper because she knows it would be unwise to lose it. Many times she was tempted to tell this hideous woman exactly what she thought of her, but the stoicism of the Whinneys held her back. If Theodore could triumph over difficulties in the way he had done, then she must not falter in the race.

Nevertheless, when she was finally dismissed, and told to report for duty at two o'clock that afternoon, Ida was in a sorry state. She felt as though she had been dragged through a hedge backwards, in both the physical and spiritual sense. Apart from her flaming temper, her morale was low. The glass had gone back badly.

She was therefore very grateful when a brisk-mannered, but extraordinarily attractive girl, at least ten years her junior, came up to her in the draughty corridor and said sympathetically: "Don't let it upset you; she's a perfect fiend of a woman, and none of us like her. She treats everybody like that."

Ida caught hold of this life-line and held tight.

"What is your name?" she asked her attractive consoler.

"Mary Grant," was the reply.

"I shall remember that; do you work here, Miss Grant?"

"For my sins," was the answer.

Ida Whinney smiled.

"It is difficult to imagine you having any sins," she said, "but I'm very grateful to you for being so kind."

"I'd be kind to my worst enemy after she'd come out from The Pippin," was the retort. "Are you coming here to work, Miss——"

"My name is Whinney. Professor Whinney, who broadcasts, is my brother." What was the good of possessing a

famous brother if you didn't bring his name into the conversation at appropriate moments?

The effect on the extraordinarily attractive girl was quite satisfactory.

"It must be wonderful to have a brother like that."

Ida Whinney was not often moved to perform generous acts, but the words brought practically all the goodness in her nature bubbling to the surface.

"What are you doing now?" she asked the attractive girl.

"I was going out to lunch," was the reply.

Ida rose to unprecedented heights.

"Be my guest, will you?" she pleaded; "then we can have a good, long talk."

During the meal, which any civilized male, apart perhaps from a confirmed Bloomsbury carrot-nibbler, would have considered completely unsatisfactory from a food point of view, Ida Whinney learned the following salient facts (1) that Mary Grant was employed in a general capacity as shorthand-typist in the Wurzimeter Language Bureau; and (2) that she disliked the work so much that she was contemplating resigning directly she obtained another post—"and the sooner I can get away the better I shall be pleased."

"I trust you won't go yet," replied her crestfallen companion; "I had been hoping that we should become good friends." And, as a possible inducement to this bond being cemented, she added: "If you would like to meet my brother, I will try to arrange it."

"He wouldn't want to meet a nobody like me," replied Mary Grant.

"Nonsense!" said Ida Whinney, not very convincingly it is true. "He is not living at home now," she went on, Heaven only knew why; "I mean he is not living with my mother, my sister Agatha and myself, as he used to do. Now that he has become so well known through his broadcasting

and his newspaper work, he has set up an establishment of his own. Mother and Agatha are rather afraid that some bad woman; you know, one of those . . .”

“Gold-diggers?” prompted the Attractive Girl.

“How did you ever get to know that?” interposed Ida.

“I’ve read about them in books,” parried Mary Grant; “but can’t your brother look after himself?”

“Of course not! He is quite a simpleton, really.”

“I thought he was the man who knew everything.”

“He does know a lot, it is true, but he hasn’t any idea of how to look after himself. Both mother and Agatha fear the worst.”

As Mary Grant did not know what comment to make on this statement without appearing rude, she wisely kept silent. The alfresco meal—a boiled egg with rice-pudding and a bun, washed down with something that the waitress called “cawfee”—came to an end shortly after this, and they started to walk back in the direction of Wurzimeter House.

“If you get in a jam, let me know,” were her companion’s parting words before Ida Whinney took the lift.

“Thanks, Miss Grant, I will,” she replied.

She wasn’t certain of what a “jam” exactly was at the moment she spoke, but within half-an-hour she was conscious of possessing at least the general principles. And the person who imparted this knowledge was the very first pupil on her schedule.

Arrived back from lunch, she was informed by Miss Pippin that she was required to take a man whose name Miss Pippin articulated very carefully, but still left completely unrecognizable and unpronounceable in English.

“Mr. xxx!!!?...xx is a Bulgar—perhaps I should say, a Bulgarian,” The Pippin explained; “he is directly related to the former reigning house but two, and is therefore quite a gentleman. You must take great pains with him.”

Ida was prepared to take great pains, being both conscientious and eager to keep her job, moth-eaten as this was, according to Mary Grant; but, from the beginning, she was forced to take a very dim view of Mr. xxx!!!?...xx. The latter, at first glance, seemed to consist mainly of hair and horrible grimaces. And the second sight was scarcely more reassuring: this alleged lineal descendant of a Balkan Royal House, twice removed, was unshaven, carelessly dressed, and carried on his person a considerable load of dirt. Altogether, Mr. xxx!!!?...xx, it seemed to her, badly required dipping into an extremely hot bath and scrubbed by a number of energetic dockers. He was that type. She had met some odd specimens of the human *genus* in her time, but never one quite so odd as this one, and she recoiled as her pupil advanced towards her, making grotesque sneezing sounds which might or might not have been Bulgarian for "Good afternoon."

She tried to quiet the patient by pointing to a chair, but, evidently thinking that this was a new way of learning English, her pupil, instead of sitting on the chair, picked it up in one hand (which badly wanted washing) and waved it over his head.

Feeling desperate, Ida pulled a second chair towards her and slowly lowered herself on to it.

Mr. xxx!!!?...xx watched her closely, his eyes shining through the thickets of hair which surrounded them. Then he burst into a terrific gale of laughter.

Ida rose from her chair. She was painfully aware that she had made a *faux pas* of some kind, but she could not decide exactly what had gone wrong.

Meanwhile, the vulgar Bulgar was advancing on her with tanks, 'planes and armoured infantry. He had his arms outstretched, and Ida, with sinking heart, realized that she must be the military objective.

Uttering an eldritch scream, she attempted to escape. But

the scion of the Bulgarian Royal House (twice removed) was too quick; his forebears had learned how to snatch their victims from villages which they had previously set on fire, and the sport was in his own blood. Wrapping his arms round the fleeing object of his temporary desire, he pressed his unshaven face to hers, spluttering volcanically the while.

Poor Ida! She had often read in old-fashioned novels about the fate which was said to be worse than death, but she had never dared to hope—I mean, she had never thought that she would be placed in such a dreadful situation herself.

And she was powerless: against the gorilla-like strength of the direct descendant of the Bulgarian Royal House (twice removed), her own efforts, frenzied as they were, proved futile.

Meanwhile, her ribs threatened to crack with the force of the vulgar Bulgar's ardour, and the spluttering sounds increased to a crescendo.

What would have happened—for the Bulgar was rapidly becoming even more vulgar—if the door had not suddenly opened, it is perhaps not seemly to anticipate; but a patron saint was evidently watching over Ida Whinney that day—a patron saint who, taking in the situation at a glance, seized a heavy ruler from the table and brought it down with resounding force on the head of the much-too-vulgar Bulgar. The ruler was round in shape, heavy in weight, and, in spite of the dense crop of hair which sprouted from the head of Mr. xxx!!!?...xx, it did its stuff. Uttering a similar cry to many of his forefathers who had gone to their well-deserved long sleep through a stab in the back from a jealous rival, the star pupil of the Wurzimeter Language Bureau gave up the ghost.

"That ought to larn him!" declared Mary Grant, looking very determined as she still grasped the ruler.

"You've saved me!" cried Ida Whinney, and fell on her neck.

"I wouldn't be too sure about that," replied her rescuer. Prophetic words!

"May I enquire the reason for this disgusting spectacle?"

The speaker was Miss Beta Pippin. Always on the alert for any possible bouts of arms (amorous variety), she had thought that even Mr. xxx!!!?...xx (of whom several complaints had been made in the past) would damp down his fires in the presence of Ida Whinney; but the screams which she had heard proved that her judgment had been at fault. Since the sound business slogan of "the customer is always right" was in force at the Wurzimeter Language Bureau, The Pippin had rushed upstairs, eager to rebuke the new assistant, and was mortified to find that someone had got there first—someone, moreover, with dangerously heterodox views, for there was the body of the direct descendant of the Bulgarian Royal House (twice removed) lying prone and very still on the floor.

Feeling that every principle of the Wurzimeter Language Bureau had been desecrated, Miss Pippin swung round on the two employees.

"You are both dismissed!" she cried; "do you hear me, you are both dismissed! Disgraceful! *Disgraceful!* DISGRACEFUL! Go to the Cashier, Miss Grant! As for you, Miss Whinney, you will leave immediately, and *without* seeing the Cashier. I consider your conduct . . ."

Mary Grant swung round in turn.

"I'd tell you what I thought of you, Miss Pippin, if I didn't mind soiling my tongue; as it is, we'll leave you to look after *that!*" pointing to the body of the prostrate Bulgar, which was beginning, lamentably enough, to show some signs of returning life. "Come along, Miss Whinney."

In this sorry manner did the endeavour to enter into the Larger World end for Ida Whinney; but, as Fate moves mysteriously, whilst poor Ida was denied any satisfaction in

l'affaire xxx!!!?...xx, she was able to render a notable service to someone vastly more important in the Scheme of Things.

But as the time for expounding that is not yet, the reader is urged to have a little patience.

CHAPTER XIV

THE PROFESSOR STEPS OUT

ONCE that myriad-headed mass, the Populace, demands something with sufficient unanimity, it invariably gets it. This happened in the case of Professor Theodore Whinney.

The Public, their curiosity aroused by hearing the Professor on the air, and reading his views on all kinds of subjects in the columns of the *Daily Bugle*, now became impatient to see him in the flesh. It is the way with the British People: they do not care for disembowelled spirits; they prefer solid flesh and blood.

The idea first came from a correspondent of the *Daily Bugle* in the form of the following letter:

Editor,
Daily Bugle,
Fleet Street,
London, E.C.4.

Sir,

Would it be possible to arrange for that wonderful man, Professor Theodore Whinney, to "go on tour"? So many of your faithful readers, amongst whom I include myself, would be only too delighted to shake the hand of this brilliant son of Britain.

Yours sincerely,

HYPNOSIA TETCH (Miss).

The Editor of London's most sensational newspaper did

not jump at the suggestion; he was still feeling pretty sore about his latest contributor, admirable instrument as Whinney had proved in increasing circulation; the fellow had created a good deal of discord in the office, and was generally getting above himself.

But wiser counsels soon prevailed; the journalist in Hubert Tring overcame the man. Metaphorically kicking himself because he had not thought of the scheme, Tring brought the matter up at the usual afternoon editorial conference, and was gratified when what he put forward as his own particular brain-wave was loudly acclaimed. (The letter from Hypnosia Tetch he carefully destroyed.)

The next move promised to be difficult. The Man Who Knew Everything had already proved a very difficult person to handle—Fame had made him appreciably more awkward than the most temperamental *prima donna* on record—and so it was with a certain misgiving that he summoned the Professor to the Presence.

Whinney entered the room giving every indication that he was suspicious of being the victim of a horse-deal.

"Yes?" he barked.

If Hubert Tring hadn't had on his desk the exact increase in the *Bugle* circulation which had accrued since Whinney had joined the staff; if, moreover, he had not possessed, carefully locked away in a drawer of his desk, a letter from the proprietor of the paper, the highly-inflammable Lord Blazer, promising him a still further substantial increase in his salary if the good work continued, it is a pretty safe bet that he would have replied to that ungracious greeting with words of such scathing quality that the ex-ornament of Grantley would have wondered what had scorched him. As it was, he ladled out honey.

"I must apologize, Professor, for troubling you to look in on me, but it happens I have a rather interesting—or what

I hope you will consider a rather interesting—proposal to put up to you.”

“What is it?” Whinney seemed conscious of his power.

“How would you like to leave London for a bit?”

“Why should I leave London?” He still would give no ground. The memory of the humiliation he had been forced to suffer through the Juliette Brig episode remained like an aching wound.

“My dear Whinney, I don’t want you to feel I am asking you to do anything you don’t want to do. Now that you’ve decided against it, the matter is finished.”

“I haven’t decided anything; I asked you why I should leave London. Let me remind you that I am still in complete ignorance of what is in your mind. Above all, I like people to talk in precise terms.”

Resisting the temptation to kick this ass in the pants, the Editor soft-pedalled.

“We are at cross-purposes,” he said. “Now to tell you what I had in mind: you can turn it down, of course—in fact, I expect you *will* turn it down.”

He had backed a psychological certainty, and it romped home! Correctly gauging the other’s mentality, he had forced Whinney into a corner; and, like the obstinate toad he was, the Professor did exactly what he wanted him to do.

“I fail to see any reason why I shouldn’t leave London for a while,” Whinney said, as obstinate as ever.

Muttering a few words beneath his breath which cannot be reproduced here, the Editor beamed on his caller.

“That’s grand!” he exclaimed; “I hope the Northern Radio Company won’t try to be funny, that’s all.”

Horace Wimbush, Head of the “Here Are The Answers” Department, did not exactly greet the news with acclamation and handsprings; on the contrary, he frowned. Like the Editor of the *Daily Bugle*, Horace was beginning to think

that in the ex-professor of Grantley University, he had created a Frankensteinian monster who, sooner or later, would either devour him alive, or drive him crazy.

Inspired by this feeling of dire foreboding, he let himself go a bit.

"And how do you propose to fulfil your contract to us, Mr. Whinney, when you are trapesing about the country trying to increase the *Daily Bugle* circulation?" he enquired.

But The Man Who Knew Everything had the answer to that one all right, as Wimbush might have guessed.

"I shall be linked up at one of your provincial studios; for instance, I shall be at Burminster on one Thursday evening. Very well; I shall broadcast my contribution to the 'Here Are The Answers' programme from Burminster, where you have a studio. You do that sort of thing with New York; why not with Burminster, which is only 121 miles away from London as compared with over 3,000 from New York?"

Wimbush, after waving his hands as though they were the fins of a stranded fish, gave in. But he developed from this moment a corroding, deadly hate for Whinney which he felt he would carry with him to the grave. He found himself toying with the idea of buying a few scorpions in the Caledonian Market and putting them by stealth into Whinney's bed. In short, Wimbush was becoming tough.

Once they saw the green light, the staff of specialists who organized the various stunts used from time to time by the *Daily Bugle* to advertise itself up and down the country got busy. They were a hard-boiled, unscrupulous gang, any member of which would cheerfully have sold his grandmother into slavery if he considered the situation called for such methods. They bribed, they cajoled, they threatened; they used alcohol as a prime instrument; they knew neither mercy nor pity; finally, they regarded Professor Theodore

Whinney as some kind of performing fish, and resolved to exploit him accordingly.

The first town to be visited in "*The Man Who Knows Everything's flying tour*," as the *Bugle* had styled it, was Burminster, the very burg that Whinney had mentioned in his talk with Horace Wimbush. The latter had asserted his authority to the extent of demanding that Burminster should be visited early in the tour, and that the first experiment in the "Over to you, Professor Whinney" stunt, should be made at this provincial home of 500,000 people.

The *Bugle* gangsters had shaken their heads and breathed imprecations with their whisky-laden breath when this decision was communicated to them. They didn't like the sound of Burminster; they had hoped that Burminster would have been left out of the tour. They recalled sad stories of Burminster, and condemned it to Hades several times in as many minutes.

They had reason. For Burminster—except to the natives, who muttishly thought it a special kind of earthly Paradise—was well known as the wettest place in England in every sense of the word. Its inhabitants prided themselves on always sleeping with one eye open, which possibly accounted for the glassy stares to be encountered on the main streets. The rain which poured down almost incessantly on Burminster had caused a general feeling of miasmatic decay in the minds of the Burminsterians: they looked moist, they acted moist, they were moist. So moist, indeed, were they that, so far from fleeing from the abominations by which the City Elders hemmed them in, they rejoiced in their surroundings which always reminded the average intelligent visitor of a vast cemetery allowed to run riot.

Burminster prided itself on being old-fashioned; travellers of up-to-date goods had been known to rush shrieking to the station fearful lest sudden madness should seize them before

they could get back into civilization again. Burminster was supremely self-assertive, self-conscious and smugly self-satisfied. Burminster had lots of churches, prominently placed on the highways, lots of pubs hidden away in the byways, and more hypocrites to the square inch than any other town in the country. Jonathan Swift would have found plenty of interest in Burminster.

Theatre managers had always groaned and said what prayers they were capable of when their companies had been forced to visit Burminster, for this town of drip was a by-word in the Profession. "They sit on their hands so hard in Burminster they all grow corns on 'em," Willie Lynch, the famous comedian, had once said. That was in 1902, and the legend, instead of being disproved, had gathered strength. "Show me!" was the slogan of Burminster, and the expression on the faces of the locals plainly conveyed the greeting to strangers: "We don't want you here—why did you come?"

This was the town, then, to which the *Bugle* entrepreneurs were trying to "sell" Professor Theodore Whinney, and, incidentally, the paper they represented. The *Bugle* circulation in Burminster had always been a sore point with the Sales Manager. "How is it," he frequently asked, "that these half-a-million (word deleted) prefer reading their own local rag—which incidentally I wouldn't use for wrapping up cat's fish—to a paper like the *Bugle*?" And when the Burminster circulation representative replied that no London morning newspaper had a good sale locally, he wasn't satisfied. That was why, at the office conference held to discuss ways and means in connection with the Whinney tour, the Sales Manager had insisted that this opportunity should be utilized to improve the Burminster circulation situation, which he declared to be appalling.

The place taken by the entrepreneurs for the holding of

the first public appearance of The Man Who Knows Everything was the Saracen's Hall. No one in Burminster knew why this draughty but commodious building was so called, unless it was because it was about as uncomfortable to sit in as a raid by the old-time Saracens must have proved to their unfortunate victims; but there it was: a large barn devoted mainly to classical concerts of the more Spartan type, and religious meetings organized by some of the many peculiar sects in which the life of Burminster abounded.

After taking one look at the Saracen's Hall, the chief of the entrepreneurs audibly expressed his intention of going away immediately into a quiet corner and committing suicide; but the junior member of the gang, who had been directly responsible for the hiring of the mausoleum, replied: "I know the very look of the place gets you down, but don't forget you can pack 3,000 people in here."

"I'll bet you a quid we don't get fifty—and they'll only be here because they want to rest their poor feet," was the scathing retort.

But for once the much maligned Burminsterians refuted their critics; in spite of it being a pouring wet night, they left what they called their homes, and came trooping into the Saracen's Hall, bought their penny programmes (admission being free) and waited for the Man Who Knew Everything to show up. What was behind this phenomenal and unprecedented interest in a perfect stranger nobody could decide, but it happened, and that was enough for the *Daily Bugle* crowd. Even the Pessimist lost his scowl.

It threatened to be more than enough, however, for the star of the evening: Professor Theodore Whinney would have asked himself in sixteen different languages, if he had had such an astonishing gift of tongues, why he had been such an almighty idiot as to have allowed this present situation to develop. Here he was, sitting in a room—if it could be called a room—full of draughts, waiting to face a crowd of

several thousand provincial yahoos, and with none to give him stay or comfort.

None? No, none, he told himself bitterly; he had been repelled to the point of speechlessness by the gang of entrepreneurs who evidently regarded him as something akin to the Bearded Lady or the Three-headed Dwarf, but without the pulling power of either of these monstrosities.

But surely, *surely* there was someone else? Hasn't the name of one Juliette Brig been previously mentioned in this chronicle? Wasn't she Theodore's secretary? Why, then, did *she* not qualify to be his stay and comfort? Surely that is the prime essential of all good secretaries?

The trouble, or rather one of the troubles, was that in the present trying ordeal, Theodore had changed his mind about Juliette Brig. Curve as she might, undulate as only she could undulate—it all meant nothing to him now. The hand which had done that fatal hovering was now engaged in tapping restlessly on the small deal table in front of him; the hand appeared wan and jaded; it looked as though it had never hovered, thought nothing of hovering now and never would hover in the future. Like the racehorse in the story, Theodore Whinney evidently hadn't his mind on hovering; for curves and undulations had been relegated to a spot so remote in his consciousness that they might never have existed.

The truth was that, now the acid test had come, the Man Who Knew Everything was in a blue funk. It was all very well to write in a newspaper; it was all very fine to broadcast—but it was a very different pair of shoes to stand up and be stared at by thousands of people, most of whom he feared would turn out to be the most vulgar type of barbarian. For who else but the most vulgar type of barbarian would have turned out on a night like this? There seemed no answer to that one.

He was going to be made to look a fool, and he found the

prospect intolerable. That was why when Juliette Brig, looking as moody as a thunderstorm just before it bursts, came into that horrible room, he glared at her.

"Leave me alone!" he cried. "Leave me alone!"

Oh, for the touch of a motherly, or even a sisterly hand at that moment! Oh, for a voice, calm and reassuring to say: "Don't worry; it's going to be all right. These people who are waiting to see you are not vulgar barbarians at all—at least, the greater number of them aren't; they have left their homes this terrible night because they wish in their somewhat crude way to pay homage to a great scholar, a great philosopher and a great man—yourself, Theodore dear! So buck up; you'll forget your nerves directly you step on to the platform, and be an enormous success."

That was what Whinney craved to hear. And what he wanted most to see was a comfortable tub of a woman with absolutely no sex-appeal at all. He had about as much use for sex-appeal (he wouldn't have understood the term if you had mentioned it to him) at that agonizing moment as he had for a dead crocodile.

This was where fair Juliette bit the dust, for subtract her sex-appeal, eliminate her curves and undulations—and what was left? The answer so far as Theodore Whinney was concerned was definitely a lemon.

Juliette herself must not be blamed too much; it happened that at the moment she was badly miscast. There are moods for everything; and she just didn't fit into Theodore Whinney's present mood. He wanted, as already said, a stay and a comfort, not a siren.

So it was that, in his extremity, he gave her the raspberry. And what did Juliette do?

She said simply but directly: "Oh, go to the Devil!"

But now, as she sat on a hard bench in the back row of the Saracen's Hall, she felt her temper cooling. This, perhaps, was not very surprising, seeing that an icy gale was

blowing down the back of her neck; but for the sake of the record it must be stated that Juliette was already regretting her precipitancy. She knew herself to be in dire danger of losing her meal-ticket, and that was always a matter of some urgency to her.

Another factor in her repentance (for this was how she viewed the matter) was the fact that Professor Theodore Whinney was proving an undoubted success. When he had first shown himself there had been a good deal of tittering, it is true, some of it of the coarser variety; but as he commenced to answer at great length, and with the greatest lucidity and courtesy, every question hurled at the platform, the mood of the audience changed. Totally unsuspected as it might have been before, there seemed to be sporting instincts deeply imbedded in the locals. Kind hearts went for something more than coronets even in Burminster, it appeared. On the principle that even a football referee can be considered human, the proletariat of this morbidly provincial town decided that the man who was firing popular knowledge at them in the manner of a machine-gun spitting bullets must be given fair play.

That was so far as the male portion of the audience was concerned; with the females it was an entirely different cup of tea.

Who can analyse with any certainty the inner mysteries of the female—well, call it mind? Who can hope to describe what motives lay waste the feminine breast, and cause its possessor to behave in the extraordinary way she does? Certainly this present deponent is not going to make any such futile attempt. Enough for his purpose is to state the facts—and the facts were that in the case of Professor Theodore Whinney and the Females of Burminster, the latter were showing signs of rapidly getting out of control. From her seat in the back row Juliette Brig could hear much too distinctly for her peace of mind such strangled phrases as:

"I think he's sweet; if only . . .!"; "Did you ever hear such a marvellous voice, my dear; it fairly makes me . . ."; "I don't care what he looks like; he's wonderful, and if . . ."

It was all so much deadly poison being poured into Juliette's ears. She had just enough prescience to realize that if Theodore Whinney had this disturbing effect on the first body of women who saw him in the flesh, he would perhaps have an even more disturbing effect on more cultured female audiences. Women, always on the look-out for a new sensation, might find it in the man she had told to go to the Devil less than a short hour before! O! Woe! O! Calamity! O! Hell!

This wouldn't do. Juliette pulled herself up with a jerk. She had made a grave mistake in tactics, and had to retrieve the error without any delay.

She felt her worst fears realized when, at the close of the meeting, a solid phalanx of women, their eyes alight, and their breasts heaving, rose in a body and surged forward with the obvious intention of storming the platform.

CHAPTER XV

MARY GRANT FINDS HER WINGS

MARY GRANT had never found life an easy problem, but when she walked out of the Wurzimeter Language Bureau for the last time, the bread-and-butter question became more than usually acute. Once again she was faced with the heart-breaking task of finding another job.

It might seem to the simple-minded that, London being a city of over 8,000,000 people, finding another job by a girl so exceedingly attractive as Mary Grant would be an easy enough proposition. But Mary had already discovered that

attractiveness in a girl seeking employment carried its own special dangers: men to whom she applied for a post as a shorthand-typist generally appeared to be more interested in looking at her legs (which she had to admit were undeniably shapely) than at her references. Indeed, one man had been frank enough to say that he would find it impossible to dictate letters to her. "You would keep my mind off my work, my dear," he added with what approximated to a leer.

Still, if she wanted to go on eating—a painful necessity, it often seemed to her—she must continue the quest: a job of some sort, and in the very near future, was essential.

She didn't very much care what she did—so long as it wasn't shorthand and typing. She was tired of shorthand and typing. She loathed, with an intensity which surprised even herself, shorthand and typing. Nevertheless, being the girl she was, she went straight to an agency specializing in finding jobs for stenographers and typists.

The hard-faced woman in charge waved the nicotine-stained hand holding the cigarette, and snapped: "I have nothing for a girl like you!"

"What is the matter with me?" asked Mary, standing her ground, but feeling sick. She was used to defeat from men because of her sex, but she scarcely expected to find women ranged against her.

"You're too damned attractive—that's what's the matter with you!" was the reply.

"You frightful hag!" she sent back, feeling that her heart would burst with disgust.

That same night salvation came. It took the form of a telegram:

DO YOU WANT JOB IN OFFICE OF BURMINSTER
ECHO REPLY AT ONCE LOVE UNCLE CHARLIE.

Without stopping to reflect, she scribbled: "Yes thanks

Love Mary," and sent the boy off with a smile and the apple she had been looking forward to eat with her bread-and-cheese supper.

Then, when the die had been cast, she started thinking. The only satisfactory part so far was the knowledge that she had secured another job, and without much effort on her part.

Uncle Charlie was her dead father's only brother, and was a journalist. Not a very successful one, she was afraid, otherwise he wouldn't be working in a provincial town, but would be holding a responsible position in Fleet Street. But he was her only living relative, and, although she had only seen him a few times in her life, she wrote to him from time to time, because it was pretty appalling to find oneself practically alone in the world. In her last letter, sent a fortnight before, she had mentioned the hatred she felt for her present work, and had added, more as a joke than anything else: "You couldn't find me something to do in Burminster, I suppose?"

She had not expected to get an answer—not the right kind of answer, anyway—because Uncle Charlie never seemed to bother about anything; oftentimes his "letters" were mere scrawls, scarcely decipherable unless typed, and consisting of a few sentences. But now he had come up to scratch with a vengeance.

From the sender of the heartening message, her mind went to the job itself. What kind of a post could it be? Office stenographer, she supposed. Well, beggars couldn't be choosers, and, although she loved London for itself, she had grown to hate its heartlessness, and its general cruelty, especially to girls who wanted to keep straight, but had nice legs.

As for Burminster, the town might have been in the heart of the Sahara Desert for all she knew about it. She was aware, of course, that it was a large provincial town—city

was the correct term, she supposed—and that it was in Midshire; but beyond that she could not go. Anyway, it would be a change from the petrol-laden fumes of London; a relief from the life she had grown to hate, and that was distinctly something.

The following morning a letter arrived from the incalculable Uncle Charlie. This was to the effect that the vacant post was, as she had supposed, a typing job:

but it has prospects; pretty grim ones, it's true, but still prospects: you may be allowed to write things a little later on, if you feel that way inclined: fashions, and other bits of muck for the Woman's Page. Anyway, I shall be glad to see you, my dear, and I'll do what I can.

This strange epistle was signed:

Your reprobate and occasionally drunken Uncle,
CHARLIE.

Did she want to write? She couldn't imagine trying anything so bizarre, but the lure of Printer's Ink must have been somewhere in her system, unsuspected and undiagnosed, for within three days of taking up this new job, she had turned in a short article:

WHAT I THINK OF BURMINSTER

BY A LONDONER

and, to her complete astonishment, it was printed (and with very few alterations) on the Leader Page of the *Echo*! She didn't receive any payment for this outpouring into type, but that did not matter: she was now a writer! What a contrast from being a mere drudge of a typist!

Her Uncle Charlie, who had not exaggerated his failings, but was a lovable soul in spite of (or perhaps because of) his sins, said she had started well, and added that the Editor of

the *Echo* had been so impressed that he had promised to give her the first vacancy that occurred in the reportorial staff. "That isn't saying very much, of course," the journalist continued with a characteristic touch of cynicism, "seeing that the *Echo* is one of the lousiest newspapers in the country, and one of the worst-payers—but what else could you expect in a hole like Burminster?"

The scathing words did not depress Mary. She refused to be a defeatist. She refused to see any harm in Burminster, although her lodgings were scarcely bearable; it had never stopped raining since she had arrived in the city, and the faces of the locals horrified her, they seemed so clammy and generally lifeless. Burminster in general and the *Echo* in particular had restored her self-respect; more, she felt now that she was beginning at last—she was twenty-four—to be of some use to herself and to the world. That is a wonderful feeling to have at twenty-four, and Mary, her spirit triumphing over all obstacles, rejoiced in it.

The Chief Reporter on the *Burminster Echo* was a shaggy-haired, shockingly-dressed man of forty-three, who looked what he was: one of Life's Failures. If George Barton had had more self-assurance he might have been one of the best-paid journalists in the country; but from an early age he had been cursed with an almost pathological shyness, and this hesitancy had proved a fatal handicap in such a brazen business as Journalism. Although an exceptionally brilliant writer, with an outstanding gift for humour, he had been forced to seek refuge in the "City of the Damned," as he called Burminster, where his genius was unrecognized, where his talents were not wanted, and where he ate his heart out in baffled despair. Meanwhile, his job as Chief Reporter on the local *Echo* provided him with some sort of a living.

Barton had always been too afraid of women ever to have

attempted to make love to one of them, but, being the type he was, he had had his dreams, and when he first saw Mary Grant, many of these revived. Resolved, however, not to be a fool, he concentrated on promising himself he would give this strange addition to the office staff a helping hand if ever the opportunity presented itself.

This chance came sooner than he had expected. Brian Holt, the youngest member of his staff, after a violent row with the Chief Sub-Editor, a clay-faced sub-human named Garrington, had written out his resignation, put it on Barton's desk, and had gone off to London in search of a job. He had been threatening to do all these things for some considerable time, but because Apathy had eaten deeply into the vitals of most members of the *Echo* staff, nobody had believed him. Now, however, he had lived up to his word—and there was a consequent vacancy to be filled.

The telephone on the Chief Reporter's desk rang.

"Yes?"

"Is that you, Barton?" enquired a squeaky voice, the sound of which he knew only too well.

"Barton speaking." His own tone was curt.

"I want you to come along to my room, Barton; there is an important matter to be discussed."

It was the Editor of the *Echo* who spoke, and a quaint bird he was; indeed, in a town full of quaint birds, Thomas Westlake earned very high marks. He was a Welshman, and spoke with the sing-song lilt which some English people find attractive, but which induces in others a murderous intent. Coupled with this lilt, and a habit of calling everybody from office-boy to Managing Director "Mister," was the wearing at all times and in all seasons a silk hat now green with age, and a tendency to fuss inordinately over every trifle. Thomas Westlake was fundamentally sound, but he was a terror to work with; and, consequently, Barton,

who had sufficient neurosis of his own, walked along the corridor to the Editor's shabby room hoping that the interview would be short, and that he would not be forced to lose his temper as a consequence of it. Usually, he avoided Westlake like the plague, not so much because he actively disliked this man, twenty years his senior, but because Westlake's many mannerisms set his nerves jangling horribly.

As he entered the room he saw the Editor, top-hat on head as usual, bending over a proof of one of the pages of the next edition of the *Echo*. Westlake, as was invariably his custom when so employed, was making a sound like the buzzing of a hive of bees.

The Editor looked up irritably—the passing of the page-proofs was a sacred duty to him—and then, seeing who his visitor was, said: "Sit down, Barton—buzz, buzz—now what do you think—buzz, buzz—I ought to do?"

"About what?" asked the Chief Reporter, who felt entirely in the dark.

"Buzz, buzz—about this vacancy in the Reporters' Room, of course—buzz, buzz."

"To tell you the truth, Mr. Westlake, I hadn't thought much about it."

"Hadn't thought much about it—buzz, buzz," angrily retorted the Editor; "but," cramming the 1879 top-hat more firmly on his head, "you are the Chief Reporter of this paper, I believe, Mister?"

"I believe so myself."

"Then—buzz, buzz—it is your duty to think of vacancies when they occur—buzz, buzz—in the Reporters' Room, which—buzz, buzz—let me remind you, Mister, is your own special Department on this paper."

Barton kept back the angry words that rose to his lips. He knew that Westlake was not talking for mere talking's sake. He knew, moreover, that the other was perfectly

sincere and disinterested in what he was saying—he wasn't trying to assert his personal authority: he was fulfilling what he himself considered his duty. Whatever defects he may have had (and they were many), as an Editor, Thomas Westlake was a model servant; he studied the interests of the proprietors of the *Echo*, a couple of superb human oddities in whom Dickens would have gloried and whom he would have made immortal, who lurked in their fastness on the third floor and rarely were seen, speeding their way through the office on these rare occasions in case one of their employees should have the temerity to ask them for a rise.

"Do you think—buzz, buzz—we could do without a junior, Mister?" continued Westlake. The latter was struggling with his conscience: as Editor, and therefore responsible for the whole literary staff of the paper, he wished to save as much money as he could—that was his idea of being a true and faithful servant of the Odd Duo whom he respected second only to the respect he paid his Maker; but against this natural tendency, there was the half-promise he had made to Charles Grant, and the pleasure he had given himself in calling Mary Grant into his room and congratulating her on the little article she had written almost immediately after her arrival in the office.

"No; I am under-staffed as it is, and with that youngster Holt gone . . ."

"Very well, Mister. Now—buzz, buzz—I have a suggestion. We won't advertise—that always costs money—we will fill the vacancy—buzz, buzz—from inside the office."

"Inside the office?"

"Yes—buzz, buzz. With your approval, of course—buzz, buzz—I propose that we give that nice girl who has just come here—let me see—buzz, buzz—what is her name, Mister?"

"Do you mean Mary Grant?" Barton, momentarily harbouring the unworthy suspicion that Westlake had

turned Lothario in his decrepitude, managed to blurt out the words, and then stared in amazement.

"You seem surprised—buzz, buzz—at my suggestion, Mister?"

"Yes, I am surprised, Mr. Westlake," the Chief Reporter replied, having now recovered from his shock and being determined that the older man should not receive all the credit for a proposal he had been about to put forward himself if Westlake had not forestalled him; "but all the same, I think it is a very good idea."

"Then, why are you surprised, Mister?"

"Because I didn't think you would agree to such a startling change: the *Echo* has never employed a woman on its reporting staff before."

The man who usually regarded all change as an invention of the Devil now showed himself almost an iconoclast; certainly a breaker of idols.

"Then it is time we—buzz, buzz—improved our methods, Mister; caught up with the times. Miss Grant is to be engaged, then, as junior reporter, in place of that disturbing young man, Holt. Do we agree, Mister?"

"Yes, certainly. I think Miss Grant may prove to possess considerable talent."

"I believe so, too, Mister. Er—buzz, buzz—being a girl, she won't require so much as young Holt in the way of salary; we can start her at three guineas. Dear me, Mister, it's a lot of money for a young girl to be receiving each week—buzz, buzz."

Barton might have replied, and he was deeply tempted to do so, that if any wage-slave earned its keep, then the name of that wage-slave during the coming weeks was Mary Grant; however he tried to protect the girl, whose face had lit a flame in his heart, Thomas Westlake, as Editor, would see to that. He wondered what was the real motive behind Westlake's astonishing change of outlook; but, finding this a

profitless occupation, he turned away and walked out of the room. As he closed the door, he heard the energetic buzz, buzz-ing of the Editor as he resumed his perusal of the page-proofs.

CHAPTER XVI

FRENZY

THE first thought Theodore had when he saw that solid phalanx of women advancing towards him was of immediate flight. He was reminded of travellers' tales he had read describing the sensations these intrepid adventurers into the trackless jungle had experienced when faced with a stampede of wild elephants. Come to that, the leader of the raiding party wasn't unlike an elephant herself in regard to build.

He was definitely frightened. He knew he was frightened because of the sweat that poured down his face, and the way his knees shook. If he had wanted a stay and a comfort before the meeting, how much more did he require one now! There was nothing beyond the capacity of women once they were fully aroused—and these were certainly aroused: the gleam in their eyes proved that. He recalled stories of the last war in the early days of which women, whose brains seemed to be all in their feet, had rushed to shower gifts—cigarettes, chocolates and the like—on Nazi prisoners of war. So far as he was able to see, this present mob weren't carrying anything except handbags. Then . . .?

At this point utter terror devastating him, Theodore, stopping in the midst of the question he was supposed to be answering, turned round and bolted. The wildest surmises were racing through his brain, making him feel sick.

It was the chief gangster of the entrepreneur outfit who applied the closure; before the Professor could reach the door, he had intervened to the extent of catching the star of the evening round the middle, Rugger fashion.

"What the devil do you think you are doing?" he demanded in an alcohol-laden breath.

"Those women . . .! What do they want?" gasped Theodore in reply.

"What do you *think* they want, you mutt?" coarsely replied the Chief Gangster. "Your autograph, of course!"

"Thank God!" whispered Whinney.

The chief gangster looked at him.

"You didn't think they were after *you*, did you? Well, I'll be damned!"

"Women are capable of anything when fully aroused; at least, so I've heard."

The chief gangster broke into a crude chuckle.

"But they must draw the line *somewhere*," he retorted; "one at a time, ladies, please!" he broke off to exclaim, for by now the excursionists had not only reached the platform, but were actually climbing on to it, the slimmer taking this obstacle in their stride, as it were, and the stouter tucking up their skirts purposefully, and climbing upwards snail-fashion. "It was very naughty of you to interrupt the meeting, of course, but then you ladies are used to having your own way, aren't you? Now if you will present your autograph books in turn, Professor Whinney will be very pleased to sign them." The speaker had a mental vision of the Sales Manager doing a *pas seul* of triumph in his office when he was told of the astonishing success of the first meeting of the Whinney Tour.

"What do you mean, autograph books?" snapped the nearest female—a tall, thin specimen with a predatory nose and a buccaneering expression. "*I want to kiss him!*"

The world went black for Theodore; all the horrid fears

which had assailed him before now returned, accompanied by many even more hideous stepchildren.

"But you can't do that!" he cried, aghast.

The woman with the buccaneering expression laughed harshly.

"Can't I?" she retorted with terrifying blitheness. "Just you wait and see!"

With that she thrust the Chief Gangster on to one side, flung her arms round the trembling figure of the Professor and busked him heartily on both cheeks.

A low, angry murmur that rapidly changed into shrieks of hysteria could be heard coming from the buccaneer's rivals. Why should this woman have all the gravy?

The last that was seen of the Professor was his writhing figure being entirely surrounded by shapes approximately female in design.

It was the Chief Gangster who rescued the star of the evening. The Chief Gangster was not able to ignore the fact—after he had gone away into a corner and laughed himself almost sick—that the Professor had been placed more or less in his charge, and that he was therefore responsible for his safety. It was all very well visualizing the ecstatic headlines:

WHINNEY MOBBED BY ADMIRERS
TREMENDOUS SUCCESS
OF *BUGLE* TOUR

in the next day's paper, but there were other aspects to consider. Up till now the prospect of the little mutt having possibly lost his trousers had eliminated everything else; but now the Chief Gangster felt a cold shudder pass through his body. Ghastly fingers ran up and down his spine. Good God, suppose the fellow had been suffocated?

Rushing into the fray, he swept the shapes that were approximately female in design on to one side, letting necessity take the place of courtesy, and reached Whinney just as he seemed to be going down for the third and last time. The Professor was a sorry spectacle; not only had he lost his collar and tie (stolen by unscrupulous souvenir-hunters, no doubt), but he had lipstick smudges all over his face. As these were of different shades and as they varied in design and quantity, the net result was at once ludicrous and unnerving. Even the Chief Gangster, who had an extensive acquaintance with lipstick (of the cheaper varieties), was dumbfounded. He had never had much respect for women taken in the mass, but now he considered them—especially the particular specimens that had manhandled this poor little blighter, Whinney—revolting.

"Ladies! *Ladies!!*" he cried, using his elbows without scruple, "please try to remember that this is a public hall, and that Professor Whinney came here to answer questions and not to be violently assaulted!"

"It's 'is voice wot gets me!" replied one of the assault-party, a dumpy, dough-faced female toad of at least fifty; "it sends frills right through me, 'is voice does!"

"Well, the best thing you can do, missus, is to buy a Whinney gramophone record; then you can have all the frills you want."

By this time the *Bugle* entrepreneur gang, turned into a Strong Arm Squad, had formed a screen round the Professor. Meanwhile, the rest of the packed audience, feeling resentful that their own more simple pleasures had been interrupted, broke into loud protests.

The chairman signalled to the Chief Gangster, who stepped forward.

"Ladies and gents.," he started, when a hoarse voice from the back cried: "We don't want you; we want Whinney!"

The Chief Gangster tried again.

"I appreciate the fact that you don't want me, but I am here merely as a stop-gap."

"As a—*wot*?" This from a stickler after the right phrase, a shabby little man who spent most of his life in the Burminster Public Library.

"I said I was here merely as a stop-gap," repeated the Chief Gangster belligerently, "and if the gentleman in question doesn't know what a stop-gap is, then all I can say is he ought to be ashamed of himself!"

"WE WANT WHINNEY!" now rose the chant from at least a hundred throats. Before the Chief Gangster could make a third attempt at propitiation this hundred had increased to at least a thousand. The racket was deafening, and it drove the Chief Gangster into a frenzy.

"Then you can't have him!" he shouted at the top of his voice; "he's been taken ill as the result of these fools of women and I'm taking him back to his hotel."

The result was equivalent to throwing a fried egg to a hungry lion. With what looked like one simultaneous action, the entire audience rose and started to move towards the speaker. This was the Whinney martyrdom all over again, only this time the movers had hate in their heart and bitter words on their lips. If the Chief Gangster had known Burminster better he would have realized that Hell knows no fury like the rage of the average Burminsterian balked of his pleasure, even if he hasn't paid any entrance money.

Without waiting to consider the manner of his going, the Chief Gangster fled. Enough was enough.

CHAPTER XVII

IT WASN'T A NAP HAND

THERE were two witnesses of the frenzied scenes at the Saracen's Hall who felt a deep personal interest in the passing madness.

The first of these witnesses was Juliette Brig.

When Juliette had first observed the phalanx of women advancing in a body towards the shrinking figure of Professor Whinney, she had jumped up from her seat in the back row, with the intention of going to Theodore's assistance. He belonged to her, didn't he? He had said he loved her—or words to that effect, hadn't he? His hand had hovered, hadn't it? He had made her his secretary, hadn't he? Very well, then.

But, even as she rose, determined to do battle for England and St. Theodore, a rough, unseemly hand caught hold of her shoulder.

"Oo do you think can see through you?" enquired a voice so rich with Burminster accent that Juliette could only guess at the real meaning of the words. But the gesture which accompanied these words was unmistakable: this appalling woman, who seemed to have walked all the way from the local slums in the pouring rain (her bonnet was just a sodden mess), was determined that she should not fulfil her part and do her duty.

Why, Juliette did not stop to ask herself. She suddenly felt sick, not only of the frightful local hag who apparently hated her on sight, but also of the whole outfit. Wrenching herself free of the woman's grip, she fled into the street, and did not stop running until she had reached the hotel.

But it took a good deal of disaster to quench permanently

a spirit like Juliette Brig's; and by the time she had had a hot bath and had eaten the appetizing meal she had ordered should be sent to her room, Professor Theodore Whinney's secretary was feeling practically her old self once more.

And, with the return of her old spirit, came back the old Eve. Now that she was comfortably tucked up in bed, with the gastric juices that had never gone back on her yet efficiently seeing to the digesting of soup, sole, a slice from a chicken's breast, with apple-tart and cream as a sweet and two cups of eminently drinkable coffee to wind up the works, Juliette grew conscious of the grievous wrong she had been done that night. She didn't blame Theodore so much, in spite of the harsh words he had flung at her prior to the meeting; she was too fair-minded for that, she told herself, but, all the same, a terrible danger confronted her. The worst fate, in her opinion, that could overtake any girl was about to overtake her: she was in the most imminent danger of losing her meal ticket. In other words, she was about to be cast adrift. Theodore would repudiate her. She would have to find a job again—and a job at which she might have really to do some work. It was an agonizing prospect, and one so unnerving that she jumped out of bed and began to pace up and down the floor.

What to do? That was the all important question: WHAT TO DO? For something had to be done; respectable girls like her couldn't risk the chance of losing their meal tickets without starting up some kind of defensive action.

Juliette was a quick thinker. It wasn't long before she was reaching for her dressing-gown. It wasn't a very adequate dressing-gown because it revealed almost as much as it concealed; but in this emergency Juliette reached for her old friend. It had never failed her before, and it shouldn't fail her now.

Professor Theodore Whinny sat up in bed. He was still shaking in every limb (it was only after careful counting that he was convinced he still possessed the requisite number), and said shakily: "Come in." He thought, poor dear, that it was the aged chambermaid bringing the second hot water-bottle he had ordered.

But, instead of the reassuring sight of the aged chambermaid (seventy, if she was a day, and of a surpassing homeliness), he saw a vision—a vision that disturbed him so mightily that he immediately plunged his head beneath the clothes.

"Darling! Don't be frightened! It's . . . *me!*"

He recognized the voice as belonging to the girl he had hoped he would never see again; and, instead of emerging from the bedclothes, he sought yet deeper shelter.

"How can you behave in this stupid way?" pursued his secretary. "Here I have come to say how sorry I am for all you've gone through to-night, and to see if I can help you in any way, and you treat me as though I were a . . . criminal!" The voice-breaking effect on the last word was particularly effective.

Slowly the harassed features (*sans* spectacles) showed themselves above the bedclothes.

"You shouldn't have come into my room," protested Whinney; "what would people say, do you think?"

She seized on the point.

"What does it matter what anybody thinks? I'm your sweetheart, aren't I? You love me, don't you?"

"I never said I did," was the prevarication. But can Theodore be justly blamed for this cowardly wriggle? Put yourself in Theodore's place. If you have ever been man-handled by a mob of wild, worshipping women—you haven't, you say: all the more reason, then, why you should bring an absolutely unprejudiced mind to the problem. As I was saying, could any man who had so recently undergone

Theodore's harrowing experience be expected to look upon any woman, however comely she might be, in a wholly favourable light at the present juncture? I think not.

Anyway, those were the words he uttered, and, for the sake of historical truth, they must be recorded.

But Juliette—as might be supposed—had different views. She saw her meal ticket being trampled underfoot, and she sprang to arms.

Theodore's arms.

"Darling," she said, "don't be angry with me! I love you so! I couldn't sleep without coming in to tell you how sorry I am for what I said to-night! I didn't mean it! I didn't, I swear it! It was the thought of all those women waiting to make a fuss over you—and how right I was about that!—that made me so jealous! Forgive me, darling! I shall go mad if you don't!"

Pretty good work, as you can see, especially when she accompanied the pleadings with pressures of soft, round arms around the patient's neck, and passionate pressings of lips on the patient's mouth.

And the patient? What of him?

The plain truth was Theodore didn't know what the hell to do. He was caught up in yet another dilemma. The contrite bearing of the girl who, after all, was his secretary, although she didn't sec., was so convincing that he began to tell himself that he had misjudged her; that it was *he* who should be acting the penitent, and not Juliette.

That was one aspect of the case; but there was another; Theodore felt he was in very real danger of losing his virtue. He had never thought much about his virtue up till now—true, he had exposed it to a slight risk in the *Daily Bugle* office that day when he had done his hand-hovering act—but this was serious. He wasn't the type to lose his virtue lightly; and it is hard to throw aside the habits of a lifetime.

"Go away, Juliette!" he cried; "go away!"

The words were like a knell of doom to Juliette; for the first time her dressing-gown had failed her; and being a high-spirited girl, the knowledge was irksome.

Desperate, she went Nap—without having the cards.

“But, darling, why should you treat me like this?” she replied. “We are going to be married.”

“MARRIED?” Every hair on Theodore’s head—several hundred thousands in number—rose and waved its protest. He had suffered much from women of one sort and another that night, but this was the ultimate blow. To be tied for Life to a vixen like this . . . !

Juliette carried on.

“Yes, married, darling. You know you promised . . .”

“I did nothing of the sort,” he objected violently. If he hadn’t been so fearful of his virtue, he would have flung back the sheets and got out of bed.

Juliette knew she was beaten; she knew that her nap hand had flopped because she hadn’t enough trumps.

But even yet she refused to acknowledge defeat; she started to scream . . .

CHAPTER XVIII

MARY THROWS A LIFE-LINE

AND now for the second witness of those strange scenes at the Saracen’s Hall. The omniscient-minded reader will scarcely need to be told, perhaps, that her name was Mary Grant.

Yes, Mary Grant, who was there doing a job of work.

Just as she was preparing to leave the *Burminster Echo* office late that afternoon, George Barton called her into the Reporters’ Room. This part of the office building, a large, square compartment, which always looked as though a

hurricane had recently swept through it, was now empty, except for a preternaturally solemn young man—Balke by name—wearing an overcoat that reached to his heels and an intense expression. Rupert Balke was not composing an ode to immortality, as might have been expected; he was transcribing the shorthand notes which he had made a couple of hours earlier at a specially convened meeting of the Ways and Means Committee of the Burminster City Council. Balke, in spite of his name, believed ardently in his own genius: one day he was going to write novels which would wipe the late Thomas Hardy's off the Wessex map; and if in the meantime he was condemned to such hireling tasks as the recording of flatulent speeches by nondescript Town Councillors, hadn't Thomas Chatterton once starved in a garret?

Ignoring the presence of Balke, who usually had a depressing effect on him—poor fool, what was the good of such a literary clodhopper having any dreams: provincial newspaper offices were crammed with Balkes who were still reporting inquests and Town Council meetings at the age of fifty—Barton drew the girl whose mere presence seemed to light up that murky room as though the sun had suddenly looked in to say "Good day," into the corner reserved for his own use.

"I have been talking to Mr. Westlake about you, Miss Grant," he started.

"Yes, Mr. Barton." Her own voice was controlled, in spite of the excitement she felt. For to her George Barton was just a man in the office—an important man because of the post he held—but still just a man. How could he be anything different? She wasn't aware that she had been the means of a flame being lit in his heart; and if she had been told of this odd form of heating, she would have laughed—quietly and in a well-bred manner, of course, for she was that type of girl, but, all the same, she would have thought it very funny. Many men had started to make love to Mary

Grant; many more had started to say sweet and flattering things to her, but to all she had turned a deaf ear if a charming profile; the truth being that so far Love had passed her by. Love, in her opinion, was an expensive luxury—something the well-to-do might be able to afford, but which was quite out of reach of such pedestrian toilers as herself.

George Barton, looking at her, had to control himself. That such a creature so utterly lovely should have to find work in a den like the *Echo* office!

"Mr. Westlake, who, as you know, is Editor of this paper, was very pleased with the short article you wrote about Burminster . . . how would you like to go on writing, Miss Grant?"

He had the pleasure of seeing her eyes light up.

"There's nothing I should like quite so much, Mr. Barton."

"That is what I thought. But, of course, 'writing' on a paper like this doesn't always mean contributing Specials; it generally means doing ordinary reporting."

"Is Mr. Westlake willing for me to become a reporter, Mr. Barton?"

"Yes."

"And what about you?—you've got a say, of course."

"Yes, I have a say, as you put it—and I shall be very pleased to help you all I can."

"Oh, thank you!" Unconsciously she clasped her hands, making a heart-shaking picture. The gods had relented at last; now, instead of kicking her downstairs, as they usually did, they were actually extending a helping hand!

"But is there a vacancy, Mr. Barton?" she asked, with a catch at her throat.

"As it happens, there is, Miss Grant; our junior, Mr Holt, a rather headstrong young man, suddenly took it into his head to resign and has gone off to London to try to find a new job. He will have some difficulty, I am afraid."

"And I am to take his place?"

"If you agree."

"Of course, I agree! Haven't I already said so? Oh, Mr. Barton," reaching out and taking the hand resting on the edge of the desk, "you don't know how happy you have made me feel!"

"I am . . . er—glad, Miss Grant."

A sudden fear smote her.

"But the others—the other reporters, I mean. I shall be the only girl here," looking round the disordered room.

Barton laughed reassuringly.

"I shouldn't worry about that, if I were you," he said.

"But it *does* worry me," replied the new reporter; "I'm terribly grateful to you and Mr. Westlake, of course, but I should hate to cause any bad feeling amongst the staff."

Barton, in order to avoid making a fool of himself, became paternal.

"My dear child," he said, "the only bad feeling a girl like you could possibly cause amongst the staff is that they will all fall over themselves to try to help you. . . . And now to business," he continued, gulping to avoid saying anything which he might afterwards regret. "Your salary is to start at three guineas a week. It was Mr. Westlake who suggested the figure, and, although I know it's not very much, I shall try to get it raised as soon as possible. What are your views?"

During the last few seconds of this speech Mary had been doing some extra-rapid figuring; her life, ever since she had been left alone in the world and forced to earn a living, had been a good deal occupied by rapid figuring before saying "Yes" or "No" to a new job.

"It isn't a great deal, but I can manage," she replied, "and thank you once again. When do I start?"

The Chief Reporter was stopped from rejoining: "To-

morrow morning at eight o'clock," by the telephone on his desk ringing.

"Excuse me," he said, and took off the receiver mechanically. After listening for a few moments, he hung up and turned back to Mary. The usual severity of his face was now softened by a smile.

"This looks like Fate, Miss Grant," he stated. "That 'phone message was from the wife of the man I had 'marked' to do an important engagement to-night. He's been silly enough to fall off his motor-bike and break his ankle."

"I'm sorry."

"You needn't be; I intend to let you go in his place."

"Me? To this important engagement?"

"Yes. This is a wonderful chance, and I know you won't let me down."

"I shan't if I can help it—but what is the engagement?"

"Have you ever heard of Professor Theodore Whinney?"

"The broadcaster?"

"That's the fellow. A genius in his way, I suppose, but a crank all the same."

"Why do you say that, Mr. Barton?"

The Chief Reporter smiled. How unlike this scene was from the usual American film depicting newspaper-life: instead of being a hard-boiled, blaspheming hoodlum, he was actually encouraging the latest recruit to ask him questions!

"I say it because the man seems to have gone publicity-mad," he replied.

"I don't think he is as bad as that."

He stared.

"Do you know Whinney?"

She shook her head.

"No, but I've met his sister. She was going to introduce me——"

The newspaper-man in Barton caused him to jump.

"Then it ought to be easy," he mused.

"What?"

He caught hold of her gently by the shoulder.

"Listen, Miss Grant: this newspaper is about the worst specimen of journalism in the whole of England. I'm not breaking any confidence in telling you that, although I may be a trifle disloyal to my employers; and if you don't believe me, ask your uncle when—when he's sober. But now we—you and I, that is—have a chance to prove to the rest of the world that the *Burminster Echo* is not entirely staffed by cripples. What I want you to do, my dear, is to see Whinney some time to-night, either before or after the meeting at the Saracen's Hall (you have seen the bills all over the town), and get an interview with him."

"But——"

He paid no heed.

"Got a pencil? Here's some paper. You write shorthand, I know. Now these are the questions I want you to ask him. Ready? (1) What good does he think he is doing going round the country behaving like a circus performer?"

"Mr. Barton——!"

He ignored her, and continued: "(2) Whether he thinks it is dignified for a Professor at a University, even if it is a comparatively unknown one like Grantley, to behave in this way? (3) What does he *really* think of the 'Here Are the Answers' broadcasts? Does he imagine that they are spreading popular knowledge amongst the masses? Got all that down?"

"Yes," replied Mary Grant in a small voice.

"Then read it back to me, please, so that there shall be no mistake."

She did so.

"Good! It's no good trying to be a newspaper reporter unless you can read your shorthand notes correctly. In addition, I shall want you to arrive early at the Hall—here's

the Press ticket which will get you in—and write a general description of the scene. It's a wonderful chance for you, Mary, as I said before, and I know you won't let me down."

"I'll try not to, Mr. Barton," she repeated.

"Then you won't. Now, I must get away; I'm late as it is."

He left her with one of those rare smiles illuminating his face.

Her pluck had failed her at the last moment; instead of walking to the Press table, placed immediately below the platform, Mary, seized with an overwhelming sense of self-consciousness, had stayed at the back of the hall.

She was curious to see what kind of a person this illustrious brother of the woman she had met at the Wurzimeter Language Bureau would turn out to be, and she was disappointed to see that physically he was so insignificant.

But this impression faded directly she heard Whinney speak; his voice affected her strangely. She would not have gone so far, perhaps, as to admit that the Professor's voice thrilled her, but it served to remind her that many other great men were physically also-rans. Her desultory reading of history recalled the outstanding case of Napoleon, as an example.

The longer Whinney remained on the platform, the more she became persuaded that he was a mental giant gifted with a voice of astonishing power; and she was, therefore, not altogether surprised to note the effect which this astonishing voice had on the women all about her. Ridiculous—and somewhat humiliating—as it was, she felt half-inclined to jump to her own feet and join the motley procession of hero-worshippers!

She did jump to her feet when she saw that the preposterous situation was out of hand, and that the object of this vociferous homage looked like getting seriously hurt; but it

was too late then to do anything; besides, what could she do on her own? It would have required fifty policemen to handle the business properly and restore decent order at this juncture.

Thus, for the second time, she was forced into passivity; but when she saw the hero of the evening—bearing a close resemblance to that fictitious figure, beloved of the jesting schoolboy, the supposed Wreck of the Hesperus—carried away on the shoulders of a number of strangers (actually the members of the *Bugle* entrepreneur gang), she rushed out by the main entrance, ran round to the side-door, heard the leader of the rescue-party grunt to the driver of the taxi that had been hurriedly summoned, “Grand Hotel,” and, taking to her heels as though she was still Captain of the School Hockey team, arrived at the gloomy caravanserai that bore such an incongruous name, almost as quickly as the taxi itself.

Without waiting for any further inspiration—she had conquered her self-consciousness by this time—she walked past the hall-porter uttering the magic word “Press,” and, seated in a quiet corner of the lounge, watched the much-battered Professor, the victim of woman’s exorbitance, being assisted into the lift, *en route*, she presumed, to his bedroom.

Somehow or other, Mary told herself, she had to get into that bedroom.

Let us pause at this point. The author has done his job very badly if he has attempted to deceive the reader in the important matter of Mary Grant’s character. A novelist like Miss Anita Morphine, whose saccharine so-called romances are so heavily drenched in sex, would delight, he has no doubt, in turning a perfectly respectable character like Mary Grant into a wanton baggage just in order to help her out with the plot, but—see this wet, see this dry?—there is nothing like that about yours truly: the latter is endeavouring to put down on paper the true account of the quaint

and peculiar adventures which befell Professor Theodore Whinney on his way to what some people might call Fame.

And this being essentially a true account, the workings of Mary Grant's mind—an entirely wholesome mind in keeping with its fragrant owner—must be supplied. There can be no tampering with the eternal verities in order to make the plot work more smoothly.

Very well, then; now that we understand each other, let it be stated that when Mary resolved to get into the Professor's bedroom, she was urged on to this perilous feat by motives which were entirely beyond suspicion. Her orders had been implicit: she was to obtain an interview with Whinney either before or after the meeting at the Saracen's Hall, and during the course of that interview she had to ask him three questions. The fact that she viewed them all as impertinent questions, did not affect the issue one iota: if she wanted to justify the trust and confidence which that very nice man, Mr. Barton, had placed in her, she had to ask these questions, and get replies to them. Moreover, there was her future as a reporter to be considered; she simply daren't fall down on her first assignment.

The ordinary girl, directly the idea had flashed into her brain, would probably have ordered a whisky-and-soda, or some equally potent fluid, for the scheme called for considerable daring, but Mary, as already stated, was a very nice girl; she was so nice that (a) she didn't swear (unless very strongly provoked); (b) she didn't make her finger-nails look like blood-stained talons; (c) she only used the minimum of make-up; and (d) although her legs were dreams she didn't sport them provocatively. Altogether, Mary was about as nice as they come—if you liked the rather old-fashioned type of charming girl; and, believe me, it is surprising how many men of sense and intelligence, not to mention good taste, now prefer the old-fashioned type. Steppers may be

O.K. for supplying a brief stimulus, but they don't last; they're always poor stayers.

After this brief running commentary, we will get on. Mary, then, once the idea had flashed into her pretty head, did not call in the aid of strong drink. She hated the taste of whisky, in any case, and she knew that she would require all her wits about her.

Rising from her seat in the quiet corner of the lounge, she approached the not-too-dizzy blonde in the reception office.

"Could I have a room for to-night?" she asked.

The not-too-dizzy blonde, whose knowledge of human nature she claimed to be encyclopædic—she could have written a ten-volume treatise on commercial travellers alone—gave the speaker a swift, appraising glance.

"For one night?" she asked in a voice ruined by smoking too many cheap cigarettes.

"Yes, just for one night."

The not-too-dizzy blonde peered over the edge of the desk.

"Any luggage?"

"It's—it's at the station."

A lie!

Granted. But is a girl to be condemned because she tells a white lie in order to fulfil her destiny? The world has come to a pretty pass if such mugwumpery is to be tolerated.

"Very well; you can have a room for to-night . . . name?"

"Grant. Mary Grant."

"Sign the register, please," said the not-too-dizzy blonde, pushing a heavy book in Mary's direction.

The pen she also furnished being, like all hotel pens, completely unusable, Mary took the stylo in which she had recently invested out of her bag and wrote her name on the stipulated line. She added the one word "London" under the heading of address.

That obstacle surmounted, the next step was to ascertain the number of the room to which the much-battered

Professor had been taken. Perhaps the not-too-dizzy blonde could help.

"You have the wonderful Professor Whinney staying here, haven't you?" she observed in what she hoped would sound a casual, if bright, conversational voice.

But the Keeper of the Gate was not to be drawn. Women who have reached the peony stage are apt to be abrupt when dealing with the June-rose section of their sex. They are too vividly reminded, perhaps, of what they themselves might have been if only they had behaved differently.

"We never discuss our guests at the Grand," the not-too-dizzy blonde replied in a tone of finality.

"Sorry—only I thought I recognized him in the lift just now. I happen to be a great friend of his sister; we worked together in London."

This was one in the eye for the not-too-dizzy blonde, and she reacted according to her species. Poor as her present job was, she didn't want to lose it. She recalled that the Manager—that seedy tough—had put on airs directly he knew that the celebrated broadcaster had chosen the Grand as his temporary lodging; and he had told her sharply that this distinguished guest must be shown every consideration during his short stay. It might go hard with her, she reflected, if she adopted too high a hand with this girl who claimed to be a friend of the family. The girl might be a liar—she probably was for all her innocence—but she couldn't afford to take any chances. She had to play safe.

"Indeed! How interesting!" she replied, working her face into the best imitation of an ingratiating smile she could contrive. "Were you at the meeting to-night? I should have loved to have gone," hand to hair, "but I couldn't manage it. Such a shame!"

"Indeed it was," replied Mary, playing up; "yes, I went. It was wonderful! But some of the women got out of hand, and they mobbed the poor Professor."

"The hussies! It's absolutely disgusting, isn't it, what *some* women will do?" And the speaker, who had done a few things herself in her time, tried to look righteously indignant. "You're on the same landing as the Professor," she continued, throwing a sop; "number 135; third floor. Shall I get one of the porters to fetch your luggage?"

Poor Mary, unused to double-dealing of any kind, was nonplussed; mentally she was obliged to stand first on one of her dream legs and then on the other. Elated at the item of intelligence, she was dumbfounded by the question which followed it.

"Oh, no; you needn't bother," she replied, blushing furiously; "I can manage." Then, unable to carry on the pretence any longer, she turned away and walked out of the hotel, conscious that the N-T-D-B was probably staring suspiciously after her.

With the door of No. 135 securely locked, the *Echo* reporter, out on her first important job, sat staring into space. So far, so good: she was safely installed only two rooms away from her quarry (the Professor, she had been told by the elderly chambermaid who had volunteered to unpack the bag she had rushed to her lodgings to fetch, occupied 137), but a lot remained to be done; in fact, now that she was able to view the situation objectively, she realized that practically everything remained to be done. The labours of Sisyphus were nothing compared to hers: she had to get into No. 137, and, without the Professor calling for the local constabulary, she had to ask him three highly impertinent questions and get the answers. Newspaper reporting did not seem quite the joyous occupation she had earlier in the evening visualized it to be.

The only thing that seemed certain in a world which had become very uncertain, indeed, was that she must on no account undress; the chance of the Professor screaming for

help would be considerably lessened, she imagined, if she went into No. 137 fully clad than if she went in exiguously attired. No, she certainly must not undress. Shoes off, perhaps; but nothing else.

Another problem was when exactly should she do the sallying forth? It seemed to her from every point of view that the sooner she got the wretched business over and done with, the better for everybody—especially herself. Obviously it would be more awkward—she was thinking of the possible consequences now—if she entered the Professor's sleeping chamber in the middle of the night.

This reflection caused several more wrinkles to appear on her forehead. They were induced by the nerve-racking questions (1) supposing the Professor, feeling timid after the awful experience he had had, locked his door; (2) supposing he thought she was a thief instead of a newspaper reporter and had her arrested?

If Mary Grant had been the ordinary type of girl, she might have done two things at this point, and done them simultaneously: firstly, she might have abandoned all hope, and secondly, she might have consigned this terribly difficult new job of hers to Hades. Instead, she took off her street shoes, put on slippers, and then, walking across the floor, she opened the door and peered cautiously out into the corridor.

Just in time to see another girl walking into No. 137!

Mary had caught only a glimpse of this intruder, but what she had seen she hadn't liked; she looked fast—terribly fast, if her dressing-gown was anything to go by.

Suddenly some words which Ida Whinney had said about her brother came back to her. "He is extremely clever at many things, but an absolute simpleton at others." Yes, that was what the Professor's sister had said—and who should know her brother's character better?

One thought, and one thought only, leapt, starry-eyed,

into Mary's mind: she must save the brother of the woman she had befriended! She must save him from this hussy; if needs be she must save him from himself! For to her way of thinking there could be only one explanation of that girl going into the Professor's room. It nerved her to action. Disregarding everything else in her wish to be of service to the man who was a simpleton with regard to women—whoever heard of a Professor who wasn't a fool where women were concerned?—Mary crept along the corridor and shamelessly tried to listen to what was being said on the other side of the door numbered 137.

If the disputants had only controlled the pitch of their voices, her zeal might have been wasted; but as it was, the eavesdropper was able to catch the fundamentally vital parts. These were important enough in her opinion to warrant interference, even by a complete stranger, for it was clear beyond any doubt that her worst fears had been justified: this girl wearing the chorus-girl dressing-gown had gone brazenly into the Professor's bedroom with the express purpose of forcing him into marriage! Could anything be more despicable?

What could she do herself? Burst in on the pair? But if she did this, what possible excuse could she offer for the interference? It would sound too absurd (even to a Professor whose knowledge of women was probably *nil*) to say that, overhearing the conversation, she had decided to break in on it because she knew his sister. This saving a poor loony from himself wasn't quite so simple.

Suddenly Theodore Whinney, forgetting the risk to his virginity, flung the bedclothes from him.

"What's that?" he demanded.

The answer came from without.

"FIRE!" screamed a voice; "FIRE!"

.

Back in No. 135, Mary had the satisfaction of seeing the girl she already loathed rushing out of No. 137, whilst general pandemonium reigned.

CHAPTER XIX

THE SOFT HEART OF AMELIA HARDCASTLE

THEODORE rubbed his eyes. He had reason.

First of all there was the front page of the *Daily Bugle*. It was scarcely to be wondered at, of course, that Fleet Street's most sensational sheet should make the most of the occasion, but Theodore was scarcely in the mood to read an inch-deep headline stretching right across the first two columns of the *Bugle*:

PROFESSOR CAUSES BURMINSTER RIOT

and below:

WOMEN MOB THE MAN WHO KNOWS EVERYTHING

and below this:

SENSATIONAL START TO WHINNEY'S WHIRLWIND TOUR: OUTSTANDING SUCCESS

Yes, that was quite enough to be going on with. Theodore, feeling that he had been the victim of a Japanese earthquake, a Florida hurricane, and a Burma monsoon, all together, wished for a fourth catastrophe—he prayed silently but fervently that the earth would open so that he might be swallowed up!

That was his whim, and he looked such a picture of woe that when the elderly chambermaid—they ran to elderly

chambermaids in Burminster because of the Pecksniffian qualities of the Watch Committee—came into the room with a special jug of shaving water, she almost burst into tears. Theodore, sitting up in bed looking as though he had read of his own death in the newspaper that shook in his trembling hands, was such a forlorn spectacle that her motherly heart was touched.

"What is it, my poor lamb?" she asked. "Have you had bad news?"

"Bad news?" He smiled sourly at the under-statement. "No, not bad news," he replied with an elaborate sense of sarcasm that went clean over the chambermaid's head; "I have merely spent a night in Hell."

Amelia Hardcastle refused to take him seriously.

"You must have had a nightmare after that false alarm of 'fire,' sir," she said soothingly; "that was a one, and no mistake; I've been at the Grand for nearly twenty years now, man and boy as the saying goes, and I never remember anything like that."

"Who gave the alarm?" asked Theodore, whose mind was still hazy on the point, although various people, including the Manager of the hotel himself, had seemed to come into his room at various times before he dropped off into an uneasy sleep.

"That's the funny part about it, sir," replied Amelia; "we've questioned everybody, but no one's owned up to it. Not that they would, I s'pose, seeing as they must have meant it for a practical joke. But a poor sort of joke, as I said to Lizzie Rathbone—she does the floor below, sir—seeing as how we might all have been burned alive in our beds—that is, if there had been a real fire, I mean, sir."

At any other period in his life, especially at any other period since he had become nationally known as a broadcaster, Theodore would have felt it his duty to rebuke the

speaker for gross carelessness in the use of the King's English, but now he wearily turned his head towards the pillow. He had borne enough; he could stand no more.

Amelia's soft heart was touched.

"Now you mustn't give in, sir," she said; "everybody's very sorry for you, I feel sure—they were talking about it in the kitchen when I went down to get my first cup of tea this morning. The Chef was all for you, sir, if I make my meaning clear. The Chef said that any man would feel like cutting his throat—his very words, sir, if I never stir again—if they had been treated like you was treated last night at the Saracen's Hall. A fair disgrace it was, and no error; why, it was worse than the Suffragettes my mother used to tell me about when I was a girl. 'What are you women coming to?—that's what I want to know.' Those were the very words the Chef said, as true as I am standing here . . . and it isn't as though the Chef liked women, because he don't; a reg'lar hater he is, if you follow me, sir. And I said to him—the Chef I mean, sir—it isn't as how he—meaning you this time, sir—was anything to look at; one p'raps could understand it then. But you aren't, are you, sir?—not a bit fast-looking or anything like that; in fact, when I look at you now, lying in bed so peaceful, you remind me somehow of my brother Erbie—the one that never was the same after he caught chicken-pox and then went out to Gazelle or one of those other foreign parts and died after marrying a Red Indian—or p'raps it was an ordinary kind of Indian; anyway, Erbie was always a caution, so it might have been a Red Indian; nothing ever stopped our Erbie doing what he wanted to do."

Theodore groaned.

"It's some food you want, my poor lamb," said Amelia, misinterpreting the sounds of anguish; "now what would you like—a nice, tasty kipper or some bacon and an egg? P'raps as you'll be having it in bed, you'd better just have

some toast and marmalade, although I *have* known marmalade to get on the sheets. It's a nuisance, is marmalade, when it gets on the sheets. Are you what they call a tidy eater, sir, that's the important thing, because you see . . ."

"Begone!" cried Theodore, holding his head as though he were afraid it might leave his body at any moment and start bouncing up and down on the floor.

Amelia smiled.

"You're like our Erbie," she said admiringly; "he was a good one, too, at those foreign languages. Well, I won't be long fetching your breakfast."

After the door had closed behind his latest blister, Theodore wondered quite seriously upon the possibility of his having turned crazy. Little wonder if he had gone mad, seeing what he had been through. It was an awful prospect that loomed directly ahead—a long procession of psychiatrists, looking slantwise at each other and smiling slyly as he committed himself deeper and deeper.

When Theodore saw a piece of white paper advancing further and further into the room from beneath the bottom of the bedroom door, he could have cried out in fresh horror, for this sight, he told himself, could be only another symptom of his instability of mind—equivalent to the far-famed pink elephant materializing before the peering eyes of the dipsomaniac.

He mentally caught hold of himself, performing one or two simple tests which he had undergone when insuring his life a few years before. Yes, his nervous system seemed in fairly good shape in spite of his recent terrible experiences

Then . . .?

To try to put an end to his doubting, he got out of bed, and did an Agog-like walk towards the door.

Yes, it *was* a piece of paper—and there was writing on it. This was the writing:

I am a friend of your sister, Ida. I want to see you urgently.

My name is Mary Grant, and I am in Room 135. Directly you are dressed, will you please let me know?

P.S—It was I who saved you last night. I rely on you not to give me away.

M. G.

If Theodore's mind had been misty before, it was now covered with dense clouds. Reeling back to bed, he did some more head-clutching.

Amelia Hardcastle—she of the soft heart—entered, carrying a tray.

"Now you drink *that*," she said firmly, holding out the cup of tea which she had poured out; "it will clear your head."

As these were the first sensible words she had uttered, Theodore obeyed. And, behold, it was even as Amelia had said; the clouds rolled away, and he felt sane and more or less master of himself once more.

So much master of himself, indeed, that he fell voraciously on the foodstuffs; porridge, a plate of bacon and eggs, and a mound of toast, liberally covered by butter and marmalade, vanished in record time, the whole procedure being watched over maternally by Amelia, who appeared to have handed over any other functions to a deputy.

"Feeling better now, *I* know," she commented when Theodore had polished off a third—the last in the pot—cup of tea.

"Very much, thank you. . . . Now, there's one other thing . . ."

"Call me, Amelia, sir, if you like," supplied this astonishing chambermaid.

"Amelia, then. I want you—er—to do something for me, Amelia."

"Yes, sir."

"There's—er—there's a young lady named Grant, *Mary* Grant, staying, I mean occupying, room No. 135 . . ."

"Why, that's only two doors away, sir!"

"Really? So close as that. Well, this young lady I find is a very close friend of my sister, and—er—she wants to come in and see me. Not before I'm dressed, of course."

"Oh, of course not, sir! As though I should have thought anything different!"

Disregarding the comment, Theodore proceeded to plough his rocky furrow.

"So, if you will be good enough to give my compliments to the young lady in question—her name, as I have already said, is Mary Grant and she occupies Room No. 135—and tell her I shall be pleased to see her . . ."

"Where, sir? Not in here?"

"Certainly not! Have I given you any indication that I intended to see her in here? I suppose the Manager can place a private sitting-room at my disposal for—er—the purpose of this interview?"

"That I *couldn't* say, sir, without making enquiries."

"Then please be good enough to find out at once. Tell the Manager it is most important."

"Well, I s'pose you know best." Amelia, for some astonishing reason—no doubt due to her sex—seemed to undergo a rapid change of heart: the organ which had previously been so soft had now apparently developed hardening of the arteries. Amelia actually sniffed.

Theodore paid no attention; he continued with his ploughing.

"I shall be ready to receive Miss Grant—please go to Room 135 first—in the private sitting-room which the Manager must place at my disposal in precisely twenty-five minutes' time. Can I trust you to do all that for me, Amelia?"

It was the simple trust that did it. Amelia became Old Soft Heart again. Men would be men, she knew from her own past and from what other (and younger) chambermaids

had told her; and, although she hadn't expected this sawed-off specimen to show the signs—well, bless him, one was only young once . . .

"Of course I will, sir," she said, and beamed as maternally as ever.

CHAPTER XX

WINGED WORDS

THE Manager had played his part. True, this private sitting-room was a mere box of a place, furnished atrociously; but there was at least a table and two chairs in it. And seated on these chairs on opposite sides of the table, Professor Theodore Whinney and Miss Mary Grant could now have been seen looking concentratedly at each other.

As it is a writer's special privilege, not to say bounden duty, to allow the reader to look into the minds of his characters, let us now tackle the task of divulging what both Theodore and Mary were each thinking.

Ladies first, of course:

"He is really quite an interesting-looking man; at least, he will be when he becomes less of a simpleton as regards women. Clever, of course; that high forehead proves that. And obviously a gentleman. I am glad I helped him out of that troublesome business last night. But I wonder what he will say when I ask him those questions? And he's got to answer them quickly because Mr. Barton will be demanding the 'copy' not later than 10.30."

And Theodore:

"If I hadn't become sick of all women—thank goodness that minx Juliette Brig has vanished (I hope she never comes back)—I should probably consider this friend of Ida's (how on earth could she become a friend of Ida's? I must probe

into that) quite an attractive girl. I must show her proper gratitude, too, for her quick wittedness last night. Incidentally, she is undeniably pretty. And her style of dress is appealing; her clothes would seem to be quite old, but they are worn with an air of distinction. I like her hands, too; the fingers are shapely and the nails well cared for, without that awful varnish . . . Oh, yes, a really nice girl—er—superficially, at all events. I must be kind to her.”

The following conversation then took place:

“I must express my thanks to you, Miss Grant, for your—er—timely action last night. I cannot, of course, go into details concerning the very embarrassing situation in which I found myself through—er—no fault of my own; at least—er——”

“Please, Professor, don’t trouble to explain,” cut in Mary. “And now I have to do a little explaining myself.”

“Indeed?” Theodore’s eyebrows took on an upward tilt.

“Yes.” She raced on. “You see, Professor, whilst it is true I know your sister, Ida—we met in London at the Wurzimeter Language Bureau—my real object in asking to see you this morning was to get an interview.”

Theodore’s eyebrows almost disappeared.

“An interview, Miss Grant? I am afraid I don’t understand.”

“It’s easily enough explained, Professor. I am a reporter on the local paper, the *Burminster Echo*.”

All the new-found faith he had acquired in fallible human nature went down the drain.

“So what you put in your note was—er—just a pack of lies?” he said, and his voice was stern.

“Not at all, Professor. I *did* knock on your bedroom door last night and shout ‘Fire’; I *have* met your sister, Ida.”

“But,” he replied accusingly, “you merely made these two facts a pretext for seeing me under—er—false pretences?”

Mary began to feel she was in danger of losing her temper.

After all, she had been under a considerable strain herself. And why was he being so pedantic?

"I did nothing of the sort," she said heatedly, "and it's most unkind of you to suggest such a thing. At the time I shouted 'Fire!' last night, I had forgotten everything about the interview; I am new—very new—as a reporter, and everything is very strange to me. Now, as I am in an awful hurry, for the Chief Reporter will be expecting me to deliver my copy by half-past ten at the latest, will you please be kind enough to give me answers to the three very important questions the Chief Reporter has asked me to put to you?"

"I think it depends a great deal on the nature of the questions." Theodore's voice was flinty; how was it possible that anyone so innocent-looking could practise such duplicity?

Mary's voice became flinty in turn.

"I warn you, Professor, they are not very nice questions. At least, I don't think they are."

"You should be a judge."

"Now, I think you're being hateful! But, anyway, I'm going to ask you the questions: I've got them all written down here."

She proceeded to read from her notebook. "(1) 'What good do you think you are doing by going round the country behaving like a circus performer?'"

"What——?"

"The next question: 'Do you think it is dignified for a Professor at a University, even if it is a comparatively unknown one like Grantley, to behave in the way you are doing?'"

"I never heard——!"

"Wait a minute, please. Here is the last question: 'What do you really think of the "Here Are the Answers" broadcasts? Do you imagine that they are spreading

popular knowledge amongst the masses?' . . . Well, Professor?"

"I refuse to give any answers to such gross pieces of impertinence."

"Is that the reply I must take back to the Chief Reporter?"

"It is." Theodore, looking like a badly ruffled turkey-cock, folded his arms, Napoleon fashion.

"So you won't help me?"

"I refuse to help you."

"Although this is my first attempt at reporting and I may lose my job—such a nice job it promises to be, too—because I have proved a failure . . . through your obstinacy and selfishness?"

"You should have thought of that before. I am afraid I cannot change my decision."

"Very well. Thank you. I am sorry now I helped you last night. People may call you the Man Who Knows Everything, but I think you are a fool."

"You do, eh?"

"Yes, I do. For one thing, you can't know anything at all about women or you wouldn't have allowed that dreadful girl to come to your room last night."

Theodore rose in his wrath.

"You say I know nothing about women," he thundered.

"I said that—and I stick to it."

"Then let me tell you I know a very great deal about women."

"Well, tell me something about women."

Theodore, suffering from suppressed infuriation in every fibre of his being, began to pace up and down the small room.

"Women——" he began.

He was interrupted.

"Wait a minute. Is this for publication?" asked Mary Grant.

"You can print it in every newspaper in the country!" was the passionate reply. "You write shorthand?" he snapped.

"I write excellent shorthand," she snapped back. What an extraordinary man! But if he imagined he could browbeat her, he'd be mistaken.

"Good!" cried Theodore, his face now a flaming mask of hate. "Then write this: 'Woman is the Great Treachery of Life, the Great Disruptive Force. Woman is sly, deceitful, lustful——'"

"Lustful?" challenged the recorder.

"Lustful. Look in the dictionary if you don't know the meaning of the word."

"But I *do* know the meaning of the word."

"Then why interrupt? You've made me lose the thread of my thoughts."

"I'll read back," said the *Burminster Echo* reporter, sensing intuitively that she was securing an interview which, if it did not make world history, would certainly send many millions of hen-headed females into convulsions. She might be a very new reporter, but she had already developed by some means a keen journalistic faculty.

"You have already said, Professor," she read from her notes, "that Woman is the Great Treachery of Life—I am putting Treachery into capitals——"

"Yes, yes," burred Whinney impatiently; "get on! get on!"

"That she is also the Great Disruptive Force, that she is sly, deceitful and—er—lustful."

"Now continue, please: In my opinion, for the reasons I have already given, Life would be far more harmonious without Woman. For Woman must meddle: unable to stay still and use what little mind Nature unwisely bestowed upon her, she must poke her nose into affairs with which she has no capacity to deal."

"Then," interrupted Mary, "I take it you do not approve of women Members of Parliament?"

"Certainly not!" thundered Theodore; "on the contrary, I entirely disapprove of women Members of Parliament; they aspire to a work which is beyond their capacity, and they waste the nation's time to a most lamentable extent."

"Any other observations about women, Professor?" asked the tempting voice of one of them.

Theodore found plenty of fresh inspiration for his spleen as he stopped his restless perambulations to look at her.

"Yes," he roared, "of course."

"Then please let me have them."

Theodore discovered, for some quite inexplicable reason, that he was being torn between the twin desires of wanting to kiss the speaker and to smack her. As he could obviously not do either, he sought refuge in further hostile criticism.

"Women will stoop to any mean device in order to gain their ends; they will rob other women of their husbands; they will cheat at cards; they will steal clothes from dress-shops; they will"—fixing her with his eye—"they will invent the most insidious excuses . . . yes, insidious excuses," he repeated with emphasis.

"Does that apply to me, Professor?"

"I am dealing with your sex as a whole, and not with one particular specimen."

"Thank you for that, anyway. And so, Professor, to put it briefly, you consider that Woman is a Calamity?"

"'Calamity' is the word. Give me a world shorn of women, and you give me a world that is sweet, without rancour and full of harmony."

"Who'd darn your socks? Wash your shirts? Fetch your slippers? Make your early morning tea? Sew your buttons on? Take your temperature when you were ill?"

He waved a hand.

"Men—suitably trained—could do all these things."

She smiled impishly.

"And—babies? What about them?"

"The world is teeming with entirely useless people as it is!" he thundered. "Good morning."

"Good morning, Professor. I—I hope you'll feel better as the day gets on."

George Barton re-read the typewritten "copy" which the latest member of his staff had placed before him ten minutes before, and muttered: "I wonder . . ." Then, calling the new reporter over to his desk, he said: "You've done splendidly, Mary."

"Have I?" Her face, anxious before, became suddenly radiant. "Then I haven't let you down?"

"Certainly not! I doubt if any of the regular reporters could have done half as well. There's only one thing . . ." He bit the end of his pencil reflectively.

"Have I made many spelling mistakes?"

He broke into a laugh.

"Bless your heart, no! I was going to say that I don't know whether Mr. Westlake will consent to this," tapping the pages with the end of his pencil, "appearing in the paper."

"Oh!"

Moved by her cry of distress, he went on to elucidate.

"You see, this interview with Whinney would make a wonderful story for a London paper like the *Bugle*, but is bound to be considered rather too sensational for the *Echo*, which is very old-fashioned."

She looked at him appealingly. Barton noticed that her eyes were misty with unshed tears.

"I'll go and see Mr. Westlake," he said hurriedly, but determinedly; "he will probably have finished writing his leader by now."

It was a terrifically hard fight which Barton waged, interrupted by so many buzz-buzzings that any stranger would have been forced to the inevitable conclusion that he had strayed into a sawmill instead of a newspaper-office; but eventually the Chief Reporter had his way: Westlake, against his better judgment, consented to allow the dynamite of Professor Theodore Whinney to be printed.

"But please be careful, Mister," he buzz-buzzed in conclusion, "and see that everything is put in quotes. I wouldn't like any of our readers to think that anyone on the staff of the *Echo* could be responsible for such statements; even as it is, I expect we shall get hundreds of disgusted letters."

"I'll be very careful, sir—and if you like I'll sub. the stuff myself."

"Do! Do!—Buzz, buzz."

"And shall I tell Miss Grant that you are very pleased with the way she has handled this interview?"

"Yes, yes.—Buzz, buzz."

That evening the whole of Burminster rocked. The cathedral rocked in its close; the churches and chapels followed suit. But principally the wives and matrons of Burminster rocked.

One reason why the female section of Burminster rocked was because, like the city as a whole, it so strongly disliked the truth that it never faced it. Burminster, from the days when its financial fortunes had been based on the Slave Trade, had always prided itself on its piety, whilst permitting a good deal of shady tricks to be practised on the sly. In this, of course, it merely followed the example of a much greater part of Britain, a country—as every intelligent foreigner knows—which, when shown a running sewer, will first pretend it does not exist, and will then cause a huge

stone to be clamped over the place to hide it from public sight.

There was a strict rule in all the local newspapers, more especially in the *Echo* office, that all local scandals should be played down as much as possible, and wherever possible ignored altogether. Chief Constables could get away with practically murder—one of them actually did; Civic Elders could misappropriate public funds; jobbery and corruption of all kinds could be known to exist, but the local prints made no reference to these backslidings. The excuse generally put forward was that “it would offend the advertisers”—the suggestion being, presumably, that the Hard-Faced Gents who spent money advertising their wares in the local Press were more ignorant of Evil than the babe unborn.

Existing in such a cotton-wool atmosphere, the heading—

FAMOUS PROFESSOR FLAILS WOMEN

which appeared on the front page of the *Echo* a few hours after Mary Grant had brought off her sensational scoop, hit Burminster—and more especially the female section of the populace—with such force that it staggered about all over the place looking for the horse that they felt must have kicked it.

The heading provided the first staggering shock, but this was nothing compared with the convulsions arising on reading the interview itself. That any man, let alone a famous Professor, could have dared to say such things! Be it noted that, although Theodore Whinney had not referred in particular to the local specimens of the sex he was castigating, every woman of any prominence in the local life of the city immediately sat down and wrote a stinging letter of reproof to the Editor of the *Echo*.

Thus, Mrs. Leak, the wife of the reigning Mayor, and the Member of Parliament for Burminster S.W., dictated to her poor wretch of a secretary:

Sir,

I cannot believe you realize what disservice you have rendered to the women of this country by printing the abominable remarks of Professor Theodore Whinney in your issue of the 16th.

That any man in these enlightened days could bring himself to utter such foul calumnies on the wives and mothers of this country (some of whom I have the honour to represent in the House of Commons) leaves me gasping.

I intend to pursue this matter further; Professor Theodore Whinney is not to have the last word. He shall be brought to book.

Yours very truly,

GERTRUDE LEAK, M.P.

Not all the newspaper-men (George Barton and Charles Grant honourably excepted) in Burminster were in the dullard class. Making an exiguous living as a free-lance was a youth named Balloon.

Directly he read the Whinney Interview in the *Echo*, Balloon sent a long extract to the *Daily Banner*, which paper, he knew—being a bright-minded youth—was the deadly foe and rival of the *Bugle*.

He was rewarded with the following congratulatory telegram:

Best thanks. Splendid Whinney story.

Banner.

Feeling that he was pretty certain to secure a bonus in addition to his regular rates, Balloon lived up to his name and soared into the heights of extreme inebriation.

Meanwhile, the Chief Sub-Editor of the *Daily Banner* got busy.

The commotion caused in Burminster was like a zephyr compared to an earthquake when the whole of the country read on the front page of the *Banner* (circulation two-and-a-half million) the next morning:

PROFESSOR MAKES A FOOL OF HIMSELF
THEODORE WHINNEY IS HIS NAME
AND THIS IS WHAT HE SAYS:

Burminster, Wednesday

From *Daily Banner* Special Correspondent

For some time now a gentleman calling himself Professor Theodore Whinney has been trying to call attention to his somewhat peculiar talents by allowing a certain contemporary to bestow upon him the extraordinary title of "The Man Who Knows Everything." The truth is that, whilst the worthy Professor undoubtedly has acquired by some means or other a vast amount of miscellaneous knowledge, which he is ready to give to the world in return for monetary largesse of various kinds, his information upon certain vital subjects of national importance and interest is not only entirely superficial, but utterly erroneous and, therefore, preposterous.

Having proceeded to lambast the "star" contributor of their hated rival rather in the manner of the immortal pages of the *Eatanswill Gazette* the *Banner* writer continued:

A striking example of this was provided by the Professor himself in an interview which he gave to local journalists at *Burminster* last night. Whinney had gone to this important provincial town to attend a public meeting, and afterwards he consented to receive representatives of the local Press. Ignoring various serious enquiries which were put to him, the Professor preferred to launch into an attack on Women, which for sheer vulgarity coupled with brazen impudence and colossal overstatement and general misrepresentation, has been unequalled in our memory.

Here, for example, is an actual *résumé* of the more offensive of Whinney's remarks: "Woman is the Great Treachery of Life, the Great Disruptive Force. Woman is sly, deceitful, lustful. In my opinion, Life would be far more harmonious without Woman. For Woman must meddle: unable to stay still and use what little mind Nature unwisely bestowed upon her, she must poke her nose into affairs with which she has no capacity to deal. I entirely disapprove of women Members of Parliament; they aspire to a work which is beyond their

capacity, and they waste the nation's time to a most lamentable extent. Women will stoop to any mean device in order to gain their ends; they will rob other women of their husbands; they will cheat at cards; they will steal clothes from dress-shops; they will invent the most insidious excuses. I consider that Woman is a Calamity. Give me a world shorn of women, and you give me a world that is sweet, without rancour and full of harmony."

We leave the issue confidently in the hands of the women of this country whom Professor Whinney has so cruelly, bitterly and wantonly maligned.

There were many millions who read the above; amongst them that distinguished member of Whitehall limpets, Sir Obadiah Miffkin.

Sir Obadiah did not take the *Daily Banner* himself, of course; to have done so would have been beneath his dignity; but one of his juniors, eager to make him feel hot under the collar, had cut the story out of the front page of the *Banner* and mailed it anonymously to Miffkin, marking the outside of the envelope:

PRIVATE—URGENT

As he had supposed, Sir Obadiah read the enclosed all right—and then sat back and pondered.

He had been worsted in his two previous endeavours to do his nephew dirt; was he to go on having to bite the dust?

All the Miffkin in him declared "No!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE FINE ITALIAN (MIFFKIN) HAND

THE repercussions of the *Daily Banner* onslaught were quick—and varied. Let us try to take them in some kind of order.

First, then, to Northern House, where the High-Ups,

including Sir Harry Titmarsh, C.B.E., were thrown into a state of feverish yammering as a result of reading what a newspaper boasting a circulation of two-and-a-half millions had told the world about their newest *protégé*. It was all very well to say (as Horace Wimbush, the originator of the "Here Are the Answers" programme, kept on saying) that this foul attack was merely the result of journalistic spite, and that no notice should be taken of it; it was equally all very well for the same optimist to point to the overwhelming success to date of the "Here Are the Answers" broadcasts—the greatest feature triumph that the Northern Radio Company had achieved during its history—both these arguments fell to the ground with a dull, sickening thud one minute after Sir Harry Titmarsh, C.B.E., had taken the floor.

Titmarsh's voice was grave with the gravity of a lifelong worshipper of expediency who has seen the red light, been given the office, and now knows that he must break all existing records in the matter of trimming his sails.

"All that is of no account, Wimbush," he said, looking at that starry-eyed idealist as though he were a subject for certification, "and you know it. The one fact—the one tragic but unalterable fact—is that Whinney has made a complete fool of himself—so complete a fool of himself that he is ruined for life."

"NO! NO!" cried Wimbush. Was he to see his pet child strangled without a protest? Could he step down from the pedestal on which "Here Are the Answers" had placed him, and retire into the backwoods of his former humiliating job without a cry from the heart? Everybody who had ever worked inside Northern House will share his tortures, and sympathize with Horace in his dire distress.

"Yes! Yes!" retorted Sir Harry Titmarsh, C.B.E., who was not the man to tolerate opposition once he had seen the red light, been given the office and had started to trim his sails. "As a result of this criminal folly," picking up the

marked copy of that morning's *Daily Banner*; "as a result, I say, of this criminal folly—it is charitable, perhaps, to think that Whinney was the worse for drink at the time—the Professor is ruined—and *certainly he must no longer remain one of the 'Here Are the Answers' broadcasters.*"

An anguished sob—and Horace Wimbush fell off his chair in a dead faint.

Need it be said that the person who had showed the red light to Sir Harry Titmarsh, C.B.E., who had given him the office, and who, consequently, had forced him to break all existing records in trimming his sails, was Sir Obadiah Miffkin?—Miffkin of the lemon-curd countenance, but of the fine Italian hand; the Miffkin of the stealthy approach; of the iron fist beneath the velvet glove; the Miffkin who never forgot, and was content to bide his time?

Sir Obadiah had been disappointed, and not a little peeved, when Sir Harry Titmarsh, C.B.E., flushed with wine and the success of the opening stanza of the "Here Are the Answers" had shown intransigence, but he knew that Time would work a change in this as in other matters.

So it had proved. The Titmarsh had been forced to approach The Miffkin in another matter vital to his interests, and his former patron and promoter to high and remunerative places had smiled Borgia-fashion, and had prepared his poisoned draught. After a very short interview, The Miffkin had made it perfectly clear to The Titmarsh that any favour on his part had to have a counterbalancing equivalent; and, although no mention was made of names—they never are in the best poisoners' circles—The Titmarsh left with the indubitable knowledge that, somehow or other, by hook or by crook, by fair means or by out-and-out thuggery, Professor Theodore Whinney had to leave the Northern Radio Company's Roll of Fame. At once.

Small wonder was it, then, that The Titmarsh had hailed the *Daily Banner* article as an instrument provided by an All-seeing, All-knowing, and All-obliging Providence.

After he had ordered the removal of the Wimbush carcass, he retired to his own domain and there dictated the following execution-order to a stenographer who, unfortunately, bulged in far too many wrong places.

Sir,

My attention has been called to an article appearing in to-day's *Daily Banner* concerning your unfortunate remarks about women at Burminster recently.

As the said remarks have already brought an avalanche of letters reflecting the writers' disgust at your statements, I have no alternative but to inform you that I propose to cancel your agreement with the Northern Radio Company, and to remove your name from the list of broadcasters in the "Here Are the Answers" Programme.

I am, my dear Sir,

Yours very truly,

HARRY TITMARSH.

Professor Theodore Whinncy.

Nor was this all. Theodore's cup, already full, was to overflow. The following afternoon Mrs. Gertrude Leak, Member for S.W. Burminster, rose in the House of Commons to fulfil the pledge she had made in her letter to the Editor of the *Burminster Echo*.

As ill-luck (for Theodore Whinney) would have it, there happened to be a debate that afternoon on the advisability, or otherwise, of continuing the Ministry of Unified Propaganda, an amazing war-time organization providing completely unnecessary employment for thousands of otherwise unemployable men and women, who were housed in a vast building in the W.C.1 district. This became known as The Wilderness, because reports were constantly being made to the harassed Police of people having been seen to enter, only to disappear completely.

The House was sharply divided on the merits and demerits of the Ministry of Unified Propaganda. Some promptly declared it to be an agency run by imbeciles for lunatics, whilst others gave it as their considered opinion that it had done such splendid work during the war that it ought to be retained "as an instrument of lasting good" (as one aged wall-eyed member so eloquently put it). The fact that the Northern Radio Company had been under the direct control of the Ministry of Unified Propaganda was where Mrs. Leak came in.

A word first about this good lady. Gertrude Leak—as a glance at her obituary notice, already prepared in case of accidents, in the office of the *Burminster Echo* would have shown—was the second daughter of the Right Rev. Ambrose Thake-Tilling, former Dean at Burminster, the last appointment he held before his lamented end in 1917. Educated at Roedean and Girton, Gertrude, who had already evidenced an astonishing gift of the gab, soon flung herself into all kinds of public life, interesting herself particularly in various schemes of social amelioration, such as providing woollen garments of a repulsive harshness to expectant mothers of the poorer classes, who immediately proceeded to sell them for liquor.

Meeting that promising young land-shark and bogus company-promoter, Edgar Leak, at a meeting of the Society for the Proper Development of the Higher Land Values held in Bath in the Spring of 1927, Gertrude felt what in any other woman would have been diagnosed as the mating impulse, and decided to marry. Edgar Leak, for all his cunning, was snaffled before he could put up any kind of defence, and the pair commenced to live unhappily ever afterwards.

Having about as much home-sense as a cuckoo, Gertrude continued to devote herself to all kinds of useless enterprises, peculiar to the British female character, leaving Edgar a prey

to incurable indigestion through being forced to exist on an all-tin diet, being too mean to eat in restaurants.

After serving on the local Burminster Council—it should be explained that her husband had removed his sphere of operations to Burminster by this time—it was only in the ordinary scheme of things that, directly Sir Poore Pusse-Poore, the senior Member for Burminster, died at the age of ninety-one, as the result of waking up too quickly during a heated discussion on “Should Members’ salaries be raised to £1,000 a year?” the wife of the High Sheriff (Edgar having by this time amassed a considerable fortune by purely illicit means was high in local esteem) was nominated, fought an election with such ferocity that her opponent dubbed her “Boadicea,” and was returned by an overwhelming majority to the House of Commons.

Once in Parliament, she became a natural pest, airing her flatulent, if strident, views on all kinds of subjects about which she was entirely ignorant, being rude to other Members, especially those representing the Saner Counsels, and generally deserving of a quick and not too painless death.

Listen to her now upbraiding the Minister for Unified Propaganda, a boyish-looking political prodigy, who regards her with an impish smile as she delivers her meant-to-be-scathing attack.

“Various members in this debate,” said Mrs. Leak, “have given it as their opinion that good can come of continuing the Ministry of Unified Propaganda now that the war has been won. But that is not *my* view. [Ironical cheers, and shouts of “Stow it, Gerty!”] Members will remember [A voice: “How can we ever forget?”] that I have many times protested against the existence of the Ministry at all.” [Cries of “Oh!” and a voice: “Or of the Minister.”]

Mrs. Leak was quick to seize on the words: “I thank the honourable Member for the added suggestion.” [Further cries of “Oh!” and a muttered but distinct: “This woman

always makes me feel sick!" from a parched-looking Member, evidently a High Tory.]

The Member for S.W. Burminster continued: "If any further evidence was required for the total abolition of that unseemly growth, that unsightly fungus on our public life, the Ministry of Unified Propaganda [Cries of "Shame!"] it can be provided by the episode reported in yesterday's copy of the *Daily Banner*. [A voice: "A rag!"] No doubt many honourable Members have already some knowledge of the episode—the very disgraceful episode—to which I refer. Apparently, the Northern Radio Company [A voice: "Why bring that up?"] have recently been engaged—I have no direct or personal evidence myself because I make a point of never listening to the Wireless—[Ironical cries of "Shame!" and a voice: "You'd be a better woman if you did!"] but I understand, as I have said before, that the Northern Radio Company have recently been inflicting on its already long-suffering public a programme which it calls 'Here Are the Answers.' Various nonentities [Shouts of "You're only jealous!"] have been induced to go to Northern House, there to parade what knowledge, if any, they possess, and amongst these nonentities is a gentleman by the name of Whinney—Professor Theodore Whinney, to give him his full title. [A voice: "A genius!"] My honourable friend has been rash enough to call Professor Whinney a genius; but, having a stricter regard for truth, I have no hesitation in calling Professor Theodore Whinney a fool—and a singularly stupid and ill-mannered fool at that! [Cries of "Oh!"] Perhaps the Minister for Unified Propaganda, under whom, I would once again remind the House, the Northern Radio Company functioned and took its orders, will be good enough to tell the House if he considers a man who categories all women as being sly, deceitful and lustful [Roars of laughter] is a fit person to be employed by the Northern Radio Company?"

Amidst considerable hubbub, not to say excitement, the youthful figure of the Minister for Unified Propaganda could be seen rising from its seat on the Front Bench.

Smiling his usual impish smile, Mr. Cookery Cook said: "I can well understand the indignation of the honourable speaker who has just spoken; but surely no one who knows Mrs. Leak will seriously consider that the honourable Member for S.W. Burminster could come under any of the headings to which she so rightly takes exception—more especially the last. [Roars of delighted laughter.] We may all at one time or another have thought, and even said, this or that of the honourable Member for S.W. Burminster [Fresh roars of delighted laughter], but I think I carry the entire House with me when I declare with my hand on my heart [putting it there] that none of us have ever regarded her as being . . . incontinent." [Frenzies of hilarious merriment, during which the Minister sat down.]

It was all very well for the practised professional politician, Cookery Cook, to turn the tables on his critic in this way, but the matter did not end there. The instrument employed by that modern secret poisoner, the Borgia-like Sir Obadiah Miffkin, striking in the dark as usual, had done her work.

Encouraged by the championing they had received in the House of Commons, the female section of the Island Race rose almost *en masse*, demanding the blood of the man who had so grossly abused them.

That same night a deputation marched down Fleet Street (whilst another marched down Whigham Place *en route* to the Northern Radio Company), brushed past the door-keeper at the *Daily Bugle* office, and demanded to see the Editor.

The leader of the raiding party carried an umbrella of the old-fashioned type. When she rapped on the desk with it, Hubert Tring decided to compromise.

He was not a coward, and he believed himself to be reasonably loyal to his staff; but above everything else he had to consider the Trend of Public Opinion.

There was no doubt about the Trend in the case of Whinney *versus* The People.

Extract from a letter written by the Editor of the *Daily Bugle* to Professor Theodore Whinney:

. . . and so, my dear Professor, I am afraid I can no longer consider you a member of the *Bugle* staff.

Regretfully yours,

HUBERT TRING, *Editor-in-Chief*.

CHAPTER XXII

CAME THE DAWN

SOMETHING seemed to go out of his life directly the door had closed behind the girl who had come to interview him on behalf of a local newspaper, something which was irreplaceable. So strong was this impression that, even in the midst of his mental tumult, Theodore found time to ponder on the fact. Something gone . . . yes, but what did it matter? What did anything matter? The world had crashed in ruins beneath his astonished gaze, and he didn't trouble what happened to the pieces.

Shrugging his shoulders like a weary Titan, he left the private sitting-room, now filled with saddening memories, and went upstairs to his bedroom. The chamber had been cleaned and tidied in his absence. Considering that it was part of the Grand Hotel, Burminster, there was little wrong with the room; indeed, it looked almost inviting: the worn easy-chair placed by the side of the gas-fire; the bed tucked away in the far corner; the bedside table on which had been

placed by the faithful chambermaid—Amelia of the Wilting Heart—a copy of Smiles's *Self Help* that had been in the Hardcastle family ever since her father had bought it at a sale for twopence.

Picking the volume up, Theodore speculated on the reason that had prompted Amelia to put it by the side of his bed. She had probably intended it to serve as a soother to sleep. But why? His old habit of wanting to get at the root of things and thus acquire fresh knowledge, reasserted itself.

Did this aged Hebe of the Bedchamber consider that he had no will-power of his own now that Trouble had descended upon him in a manner reminiscent of the Old Testament? Did she think that he required that ineffable but insufferable prig, Smiles, to lean upon in the dull watches of the night before Sleep would come to speed him into Oblivion?

What remained of his pride was badly hurt. Theodore rang the bell. His mind, switching from one contingency to another before, was now definitely made up.

As though she had been a genie summoned by the rubbing of a magic ring, Amelia could be seen standing in the doorway.

"Did you want anything, sir?"

"I did—er—Amelia. Yes. Certainly. I want you to pack for me, please."

"Pack, sir?" One work-gnarled hand went up to the region of the wilting heart as though in sudden pain. Amelia was ALL-MOTHER then.

"Yes, pack. I have to get back to London."

"What—to-day, sir?"

"To-day, Amelia . . . in fact, by the first train."

"Oh, sir!"

Theodore was touched by her distress—evidently she had been hearing more about his discomfiture down in the servants' quarters—but he could not alter his decision; his

mind was adamant. Rather than stay on in this place of the damned he would defy the worst that a malignant Fate could still do to him. He visualized what this precipitous flight would mean, of course; it would mean that the Editor of the *Daily Bugle* would be so angry that he would probably cancel his contract. That would mean in turn the loss of a great deal of money. But what did money matter now? What did anything matter, as he had asked himself before? Only one thing mattered, and that—but he must not think about it: the door had closed on that episode, and he must blot out the memory from his mind.

Amelia's next speech roused him to action.

"I thought you might be leaving, sir, because your secretary . . ."

"Secretary?" he snapped. "I have no secretary!"

"Well, the young lady in No. 138, sir, Miss Brig . . ."

"What about her?" Rallying all that remained of his mental strength, he felt he had to know the truth. If the girl who had been the original cause of his downfall (he could see that all too clearly now) was up to any more of her tricks, he must be ready to combat them.

"She's gone, sir."

"Gone?" Oh, the relief!

"Yes, sir; she paid her bill and went after an early breakfast."

Never before had Theodore realized the charm that was pregnant in those two simple and typically English words: "early breakfast," but now they seemed veritable talismans.

"You are sure of that?"

"Quite sure, sir—she gave me sixpence for a tip," speaking bitterly.

"Sixpence! She must have been off her head—she *was* off her head! That was why I had to give her notice; I couldn't have a girl as secretary who went about giving sixpenny tips." If he was babbling, he didn't care; in a

sky that had appeared completely black a few moments before, there had appeared a very faint streak of sunshine.

"Pack, Amelia! Pack!" he cried. He might have been Henry V before Agincourt. "Pack!"

As the aged one toddled towards him, shaking her head in evident perplexity, he thrust two £1 notes into her hand.

Almost before she had read her first contribution to the Press through to the end, Mary Grant felt conscience-pangs. As she perused the story again, these increased so that they became barely tolerable.

What had she done? It was plain enough, now that she was able to think clearly, dispassionately and objectively, what she had done: she had lured a decent man to his ruin!

Throwing the copy of the *Burminster Echo* on to the bed (she had come back to her humble lodging, consisting of a bed-sitting-room, because, bewildered by the pulsating events of the day, she felt she must be alone), she lit a cigarette and concentrated on the problem that was giving her so much mental unrest.

First, the Facts: She had scored a triumph that day; her first attempt at Journalism had been acclaimed. She was a personal success, and she had not let her backer down.

All that was on the Credit side. But what of the Debit? Here the marks were very black indeed. She had encouraged and tempted a man to make a fool of himself. True, the man ought to have had more sense, and perhaps he would have had more sense if he hadn't already been suffering from a series of heavy reverses. As it was, the whole world would now be pillorying him.

With what result? He would probably change from a hero into a ludicrous figure overnight; from a Celebrity into a Nonentity.

Bitter indeed were Mary Grant's further thoughts. She

was a nice girl, as has been said, and no really nice girl would liked to have changed places with her just then.

Professor Theodore Whinney had reached the comparative sanctuary of his service-flat in St. James's feeling as though he were a criminal on the run and as though every man's hand was against him. He had many fears, but the chief dread was that the gangsters of the Entrepreneur Branch of the *Daily Bugle* would track him down and take him back by physical force to some other ghastly provincial town, there to undergo the same harrowing experiences as had happened to him in Burminster. Rather than that, he told himself, he would die.

Since reaching Sanctuary, he had not shown even so much as his nose outside the flat. On the telephone he had given strict instructions to the effect that he was not at home to anyone. "Say I've gone to China for an indefinite period," he told the astonished Manager.

Nearly twenty-four hours had now passed, and still he was lying low, trembling every time he heard the lift-door outside his sitting-room clang open. So that his state of purdah should be the more inviolate, he had taken off the receiver from the telephone. The door of his sitting-room was not only locked but bolted. It would have taken a modern detective-novelist to have done him any harm—and even then nobody would have had the slightest idea how the deed had been accomplished.

How long he was to remain in this present state of siege he did not know: for the third time he told himself nothing mattered. He would have to communicate with the outside world sooner or later, he supposed, if he didn't want to starve to death, but for the present even food had no interest for him.

. . . He started violently.

The lift-door had clanged open again, and with what seemed a more than usually frightening sound. Then came a pounding on the sitting-room door.

Shaking in every limb, he crossed the floor of the sitting-room, traversed the tiny hall and said: "Who—is—it?"

"Charles," came the reply. It was the Boy Wonder, the youth on whom—how long ago it seemed!—he had made one or two trifling experiments with a thermometer.

"What—do—you—want—Charles?" he asked in a voice which, vainly, he tried to keep steady.

"Your sister's here," was the reply.

Ida? Agatha? In the arrogance induced by his suddenly becoming a Celebrity, he had thought he would never want to see either Ida or Agatha again. But now he ached for a person of his own blood. It didn't matter whether the caller was Ida or Agatha; he was certain that only true sisterly sympathy could have prompted this visit. And he wanted true sisterly sympathy badly.

"Wait a minute," he said, and began to fumble with the fastenings.

"*You!*"

They were alone, Charles, the Boy Wonder, having vanished after performing his treacherous act.

"I had to come," said Mary Grant. "I couldn't rest. I wanted to tell you how sorry I was. I behaved despicably; I didn't realize it at the time, but I do now—I want to apologize."

She could have said a great deal more; she could have said that penitence had caused another, and even more potent, feeling to spring up in her breast. This man she had wronged was still insignificant-looking physically, but there was something about him now which caused the mother-spirit in her to jump to arms. She wanted to soothe him as

though he were a child afraid of the dark. Was this Love? She didn't know—but it seemed a pretty good substitute for it.

She had never thought she would be able to go even this far with any man; but, then, she had always met the wrong men, she supposed—the type who preferred to look at her legs instead of at her references. That made a difference; a big difference.

Theodore Whinney was not that type; in all probability he hadn't even noticed she possessed legs . . .

"You poor dear!" she murmured to herself, moved by an impulse she could not control.

Theodore smiled.

It was decidedly odd, but not only had a distinct rift appeared in the inky-black clouds, but birds had begun to sing. He didn't make any attempt to try to explain this astonishing phenomenon; he merely accepted the fact. It was enough.

"You came all the way from Burminster to tell me you were sorry?" he replied.

She nodded.

"But your work?"

This time she gulped.

"I told the Editor I had to have a day off. I expect he will sack me when I get back. But I shan't care."

The birds were in full song now; and such song: thrushes had given way to nightingales.

"You don't care?"

"No."

"But you should care. This job meant a great deal to you, didn't it?"

"Yes—a very great deal."

"Then you shouldn't have risked losing it."

"If you accept my apology, I shall feel it was worth taking the risk."

"Of course I accept your apology—and I shall never be able to forget what you've done."

"You mean that?"

"I——" He could get no further.

"Telegram!" shouted a voice (off), and the next moment an envelope was thrust beneath the door, evidently propelled by the grimy fingers of the Boy Wonder.

Theodore made no attempt to pick it up.

"Aren't you going to read your telegram?" asked the visitor.

"Why should I?"

"But you *must*—it may be important."

He shook his head.

"Nothing that can ever happen to me will ever be so important as your being here," he replied.

"I think—I think," said Mary Grant, after keeping silent for fully a minute, "you had better read your telegram all the same."

"Solely to oblige you, I will."

She watched him tear open the envelope, open the piece of white paper that was within, smooth it out and read.

Then, smiling like a man who had become insane through sudden and unexpected happiness, he passed it to her.

She read:

CAN OFFER YOU POST ON PROFESSORIAL STAFF
IF YOU STOP PRESENT CLOWNING STARTING
SALARY 5000 DOLLARS REPLY.

ABASE, PRESIDENT, McNAB UNIVERSITY.

"Where is McNab University?" asked Mary Grant.

"Canada. Have you ever been to Canada?"

"No."

"Will you come with me?"

"As . . . your secretary?"

"As my wife."

Both were too busy to notice the opening of the door. Even when the Boy Wonder, intent on seeing if there were any more chores to be done—boy, oh, boy, what legs!—cried exultantly: “Atta-girl” from the threshold, they did not move.

Sheer Hollywood, but Life is like that . . . sometimes.

THE END

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